

Book 3: Prisoner of Azkaban

Prologue: Spontaneous Decisions

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The cell was stereotypically cold and damp.

Stereotypes sometimes serve purposes, though, and this one's was to make sure the cell was as uncomfortable as could be. It was small and cramped, even if it only held one occupant, blocked by cold iron bars covered with fabrication flaws – most likely on purpose, as they formed sharp, intimidating spines all over the surface of the bars, as if to dissuade its captive from touching them or thinking of getting out. The floor, roof and walls were covered with wood boards, though it was obvious there was a thick stone wall behind. Every once in a while, a plate of stale bread would be deposited just outside the cell bars by a silent figure clad in a dark cloak

There were no guards in front of the cell; they knew its captive was incapacitated, with no possibility of managing an escape. In fact, it was even safer if there wasn't one. The darkness was oppressive, but the prisoner was very much used to it, by now.

"LET ME GO!!" A voice protested from the depths of the dark corridor. Sounds of struggling and muttered curses could be heard, echoing in the usually deathly silent halls. A sharp slap and a female gasp of pain came next, a few seconds before the source came into view.

A pair of black robe-clad figures was roughly pulling a young woman toward the cells. That was hardly unusual; the prisoner had seen more than a few like her. However, the fact that she was still fighting made the captive interested in her; exactly why would they keep their newest victim with a chance of resisting and escaping?

One of them roughly pulled at her long crimson locks, drawing a cry of pain from the girl and a sudden respite. With one arm, one of the

figures opened the door of the nearly identical cell – minus the wooden padding – in front of the spectator's. Only now did the older prisoner notice the odd robes she was wearing, bearing a small silver badge with a "P" on it on her left breast, a green and silver necktie and another badge on her right breast, this one describing a snake coiling around a cross-like shield of arms.

"Get in there, mudblood!" The death eater snarled before roughly pushing the red-head girl in the cell. She hadn't even touched the ground in a messy heap that the other one slammed the door shut in the teeth-gritting squeak of a door in dire need of oiling and an eardrum-shattering clang.

"Let me out of here, you motherless bastards!" The girl shouted, ignoring the bloody gash on her forehead and the angry red color of her raw hands.

Uncharacteristically ignoring both the barb and the girl's enraged green-eyed glare, the two death eaters went back the way they came, silently. Only when their footsteps had faded into silence did the girl turn toward her co-captive.

"Oh, hello, I didn't see you there." She said. "Did they get you too?"

A nod. A mouth tried to move, but no sounds came out; it had been a long time since the captive had drank anything but the strict minimum.

"What's your name?" She asked, before noticing the other prisoner's mouth. "Oh, you can't speak... Is it a charm or...?"

A slender pale hand pointed at a soft throat and made a guttural croak.

"Oh." The girl sighed. The captive could almost read her mind: 'So much for small talk.' "Ha...Have you been here for a long time?"

A nod.

"For how long?"

A shrug. The prisoner had seen no sunlight since it had been locked up in this room, but it must have easily been... oh, two? Maybe three months? The girl's companion's loneliness must have showed somehow. Perhaps through the eyes.

"That long, hm?" The girl's voice shook a bit, though she hid it well. She was, apparently, considering what it would be like to stay in the confines of the cell for a long time.

"Well, since we might end up together for a while... I might as well tell my name... My name is Lily. Lily Evans. Sort-of nice to meet you, I guess."

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And, many years later, a nearly thirteen years old boy woke up, his forehead burning, but not hurting him at all.

"...Mum...?"

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Harry Potter then shook his head and chuckled, rubbing his warm forehead with his hand. Right. What a silly dream.

Little whining, Surrey: a quaint, perfectly normal little town where perfectly normal people lived perfectly normal lives around very... perfectly abnormal neighbors, to say the least. Believing themselves to be the epitome of normalcy, the Dursleys had never been loved by anyone in town.

Then, two years ago, new neighbors had moved into the house next door. Nobody had ever stayed for very long in number six or number

two, Privet Drive. Number three, five and seven were also periodically evacuated. The reason for that lived in number four: the aforementioned Dursley family. Upon their arrival, some of Privet Drive's residents had wondered if they should be warning them against the Dursleys. It turned out to be a moot point, actually.

For some reason, the Dursleys had been terrorized of them within the first week and had kept their outside activities to a minimum, as if afraid of some curse to fall on them, cast by the Zabinis.

Now *those* people were normal, if one ignored the woman's attitude and the fact that their daughter spent most of her time in some shady boarding school, somewhere in the north.

Two years later, both families still lived on Privet Drive, which was still a very normal street. Both of the houses, however, were strange, almost like even the buildings warred against each other.

Number four had once been a very... well, beautiful wasn't the word, let's say... eccentric place. Now, with the owners having moved over to their Villa in Majorca for the summer – which everyone in town knew about, because of Petunia Dursley's constant bragging – because of the attraction of the sea (And *certainly not* to escape their strange nephew and their neighbor's daughter, ofcoursenowwhatmakesyouthinksomethingridiculouslikethat) it was already showing signs of disuse.

...if a shattered window in their fat son's room, courtesy of a vengeful teenager from his school, could be considered as disuse.

Separated from the abandoned house by a freshly planted spiny hedge that grew on the Dursley's side of the picket-white fence, number six Privet drive was a quaint, homey-looking little house. The outside was perfectly normal, with the lawn flawlessly cut – even though nobody had ever seen any of the house's occupants take care of it (Nobody complained; no lawnmowers meant less noise. The general consensus was that the woman was a student in botany or something) and bore a well cared of and glitteringly clean 1990 familial car that showed with no flashy signs that the family was fairly well off.

Nobody in the neighborhood had ever walked inside the house, however, and neither the daughter nor the Dursley's nephew – that had apparently been unofficially adopted by the family – had any known friends except each other.

Well, to each their oddities.

If one of those who believed the stories of the Zabini family's normality entered the house, be it by being invited – unlikely – or sneaking in – very unlikely and hazardous – they would immediately notice some of those oddities... which included moving pictures of family members with Italian panoramas as backgrounds, a pair of brooms displayed on a mantelpiece, the odd fact that the Radio had no plug nor slot for batteries and, of course, the fact that Mrs. Zabini was currently levitating a knife around a floating potato with her magic wand, while her daughter watched disapprovingly.

...small oddities. Nothing important to be noted. At all.

"Mum, I don't think you should—"

"Oh, hush, Blaise. You'll wake Dario up." The woman admonished softly. "He's worked himself sick lately and his holidays start today, so I want to surprise him. What better way is there than breakfast in bed?"

The girl looked dubious, as if she expected the electric oven to explode any second before even being turned on. She kept her words to herself, though.

"And... GO!" A flick of her wand later, the knife had violently passed through the potato six or seven times. Unfortunately, this had the side effect of sending the weightless pieces all over the room...

...Just in time for a weary, bedraggled haired – not that this was noticeable – Harry Potter, who was coming down the stairs, to receive one square on the bandanna-clad forehead. He was still not used to being able to get up at anytime he wanted.

"Shhhe'sss got good aim," Nemesis, wrapped around his "owner"'s shoulders, commented.

"Told you, mum," Blaise sighed. "You're hopeless in the Kitchen."

"Am not!" For an adult woman, Mrs. Zabini seemed to have the strange ability to diminish her mental age down to her daughter's.

"Are too!" Blaise retorted.

"Am not!"

"Are *too*!"

"Am *not*!"

"Yes you are!"

"No I'm *not*!"

Ignoring them, Harry sat down at "his" place at the table. Five weeks had passed since he had left King's cross station and the wizarding world behind...

Well, sort of. It was rather impossible to do so in this place, with all of the items that were so obviously magical scattered across the place. Five weeks when, not once, he had been ignored or insulted, and not once had to hide the part of himself that he was the most proud of.

It was a *very* nice change from the Dursleys.

He *could* have done, however, without tasting what Blaise's mother called *cooking*. With a shudder, he remembered...

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"Kraft Dinner...?" Harry read disbelievingly on the guilty little cardboard box lying innocently on the counter.

Mrs. Zabini turned around, revealing the drenched apron she wore (Which still bore a few uncooked macaronis from the first time she had messed up and spilled it all over herself), to glare at him.

“Well, ex-*cuse* me, mister gourmet, but Dario’s still working, there are no leftovers and we need to eat. Besides,” She continued on the serious tone of a haughty teacher explaining things to a particularly difficult student, waving the spoon – that had been in boiling water not a second ago – in his direction to make a point, “I’ll have you know that Kraft dinners are scientifically proven to be a perfectly rounded up meal, and that it’s part of what astronauts eat when they’re doing missions on Saturn or something.”

Harry had not replied to share his disbelief. The fact that the smoking plastic spoon, dripping with boiling water, had been an inch from his nose at the time *might* have been the cause.

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Risking a look at what she was attempting now, Harry nearly did a double-take.

“Is that cooking oil?” Harry asked Blaise, pointing at the bottle.

“It’sss been nissse knowing you,” Nemesis deadpanned, drawing an amused look from the boy.

The girl nodded sadly. “She’s got it in her head that she can manage to make French fries.”

“Can too!!” Mrs. Zabini snapped childishly and glared at her, while absentmindedly uncorking the bottle and upturning it over the cold pan. “It’s just a matter of not adding too much oil, and to be generous with the salt.”

As she was saying that in a charlatan’s knowing tones, she did not notice she was emptying the bottle inside the pan.

“It’s more of a matter of not burning the house down.” Blaise sighed under her breath, before adding in a louder voice, “And mom, since when are French fries part of breakfast?”

Still not looking at what she was doing, Mrs. Zabini gave a glare at her daughter. “Why do you think they’re called *French* fries? The French *always* eat them, at every meal.” She turned around and gasped a quick “Oh!” as soon as she realized her mishap.

Unfortunately, realizing it meant she had startled and quickly turned the bottle around, sending cooking oil splattering across the wall and knocked her elbow against the pan’s handle, sending it’s – cold, thankfully – slippery content all over the ceramic floor, her apron and her fluffy green slippers. The pan itself went clattering against the tiles, though fortunately neither came out dented.

“What’s happening down here?” Mr. Zabini asked as he walked down the stairs, his black hair still messy and dressed in a blue night robe. As soon as he realized the damage, he sighed, though his lips lifted in an amused smile. “Elmira...”

“Sorry, er...” The woman, who was still dripping in cooking oil, blushed brightly in embarrassment. “I’ll just... clean this all up...” She mumbled while opening a closet – taking three tries, as it was drenched as well. “Where’s that mop...”

“Mum, magic.” Blaise called.

“I-I know I’ve put it in here somewhere—”

“Mum, use magic!” The daughter called, stronger this time, while grinning. Harry was barely holding his sniggers down. Sometimes, it was hard to imagine that Mrs. Zabini was actually old enough to be a mother.

“—But I just know... oh, maybe it’s in here—”

“Mom!” Blaise snapped, while Harry lost it and burst out laughing.

“What?” The flushed woman snapped, her face still a burning crimson.

“Are you a witch, or not?” the thirteen years old girl asked calmly, while her cheeks twitched and hurt in an attempt to keep her face calm.

“I’m going to tell Weasssley shhhe ssstole hizss line.” The snake declared, not that he really *could* speak to Ron. Harry wasn’t listening, though; he was too busy laughing.

“...oh. Right.” She cleared her throat and flushed a deeper shade of red. “Now I feel dumb. Thanks Blaise,” whether the gratefulness was genuine or bitter remained a mystery. Most likely, it was a combination of the two.

After a quick cleaning spell, some mumbled embarrassed apologies and a kissed ‘good morning’, Mr. Zabini was wearing the same apron his wife had worn a few minutes earlier and was busily watching over some eggs sizzling in the center of the frying pan while listening to the wireless’ sounds.

“...ended in a brilliant victory for the Vratsa Vultures, after six hours of beautiful and exciting game. In the end, it was the Vogel’s reserve Seeker, the fifteen years old flying prodigy Victor Krum, who caught the Golden Snitch and brought his team two matches away from the great Bulgarian finale. Final score was of---”

“I bet you’re better than him.” Blaise told Harry, smirking, “I doubt he managed to fly without instructions and to catch a rememberall on his first try.”

Harry shrugged nonchalantly, his attention already divided between the appetizing smells of the eggs floating around the kitchen/dining room and the words steaming out of the magical radio.

A woman took the waves: “Closer to us, Gilderoy Lockhart, ex-super famous author turned criminal fraud, pleaded guilty today in front of the Wizengamot. He was sentenced to a fifteen thousand Gallion fine, separated between Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry and the victims of his memory charms who were identified by Mister Deschamps, who was offered the order of Merlin, third class, last

week, for service to the Magical English nation. Miss Darla Kickens, spokesperson of the golden quill, Lockhart's official publisher, was not available for comment. "

Mrs. Zabini smirked while both children snorted. Revenge was sweet, indeed.

A male voice started again: "In other news, the minister Fudge has announced yesterday that taxes should be lowered by one and a half percent by next year, and that additional funds will be given to St. Mungo's hospital for magical illnesses—"

"Bah," Mrs. Zabini snorted disdainfully while turning the radio's volume off. "Fudge's just trying to get popularity points for the next elections. Fat load of good that'll do. And where is he going to get that money out of? Probably Malfoy's pocket..."

Harry gave a look at Mrs. Zabini. He knew Mr. Malfoy was a death eater; he had figured it out about a month and a half ago. She apparently knew as well...

"Sure, I'm the one who caught him." He remembered her saying, back in Flourish and Blott's. Back then, he hadn't asked any questions, though. Oh, he should have had...

"Could you turn it back on?" Mr. Zabini's asked, breaking into his musings, while tending to the toasts, which had just jumped out of the toaster. "Maybe there's something else on the normal stations."

Idly, his wife nodded and flicked it on. For an instant, the sound of a woman singing about a 'Love as white as a Unicorn's flight' came to their ears – never mind that unicorns couldn't fly – before a stomping beat and an energetic young man's voice replaced it.

"You're listening to England's number one station, Capital FM, 95.8, on this beautiful Saturday morning!" The entertainer announced. Two seconds later, Mr. Zabini walked to the table to serve the eggs and Harry blocked the sound of the radio out. When he was finished, he tuned in again, frowning when he found the speaker was now blaring out an ad in an obviously faked excited voice.

“Do you feel overworked? Is city life wearing down on your nerves? Do you want to relax and have a memorable time as a family in the most beautiful sites of North Wales? Well, here’s your chance! Here, at Garthyfog Farm, you can enjoy a great selection of outdoor activities, including mountain hikes, horseback riding and swimming in the refreshing waters of Cardigan Bay for only £7 per tent per night!”

“That’s *it!*” Mrs. Zabini’s victorious voice suddenly cut in, startling everyone at the table. “Dario, prepare the car. I’ll get the tents. Blaise, Harry, pack your things. We’re going *Camping*.”

Chapter 1: The full moon

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Some things are unstoppable in life. Time, space, the fact that a falling buttered toast will inevitably fall on the buttered side and, if possible, on the closest rug available... yet all of these examples are nothing compared to women. And most of all, *stubborn* women. And if there was one thing that Mrs. Zabini was, it was stubborn – among many other, less flattering, qualities. Stopping her after she made her mind up was, to put it simply, impossible.

For those who require imagery, imagine a little twig, weak and feeble, ready to fall into dust at the smallest opportunity. Now, imagine a speeding magnetic bullet train, rushing on its tracks at three hundred miles an hour. Now, imagine someone trying to stop it with the aforementioned twig.

...eek.

...eww.

...Well, on the plus side, it's only imagery. There is no gushing blood or flying guts involved in this story. At least... for now.

Hence was the reason why, some hours after their weak protests were destroyed by strict arguments – the same one, worded differently – the three Zabinis and the Potter found themselves sitting

inside the car, with whatever camping equipment they had managed to fit in. It was in no way a comfy fit, but Harry had to admit it was more comfortable than the first time he had rode in it; being stuck in an enclosed space on the same seat as Hagrid and Blaise had definitely not been pleasant.

The trip there was long and boring. For foreigners, England's seemingly endless sea of green fields and small farms held an attractive, rustic charm. As Harry was a true English-born child, monotony was quick to sneak its way in.

"Yellow car." Blaise chirped, giving a playful punch to Harry's shoulder as said car blurred by on the other lane.

That was the other problem. Blaise had figured that spending three hours looking out at the fields and trying to spot cows was abysmally boring, so she had decided that for every yellow object she could find, she'd poke Harry. Her pokes had turned into playful punches by the first hour after the boy had failed to be interested in her game.

"Yellow bussss," Nemesis said, though only Harry could understand him, and gave the aforementioned boy a whack with his tail. The snake *had* been interested, however.

By the time they had arrived in sight of the campgrounds, Harry was feeling a bit like a whipped slave and expecting his arm to fall off at the smallest prod. Especially after they had passed through that small town, hit three yellow lights, passed in front of a school bus and ate in a Subway restaurant.

A small wooden booth stood on the side of the path leading up to the camping grounds, where a young, pink-haired teenage girl with a piercing in her nose was noisily munching on a gum while reading a magazine. Boxes full of camp maps and guides were lined up underneath the window. Mr. Zabini took one of each, giving them to his wife.

"Sev'n pounds'night f'r'each tent." The clerk mumbled, barely lifting her eyes to look in their baggage, where both tents were plainly visible. "Tha's fourteen a night f'r'ya."

“We won’t be here for lon—”

“Book us a lot for two weeks,” Mrs. Zabini interrupted her husband, who gave her a sour look, which she answered with a wide, infuriatingly cheerful grin. “Where’s our lot?”

The cashier blew a pink bubble of gum and stared contemptuously at them for a few seconds, as if trying to make them feel guilty for disturbing her precious reading time, before putting the magazine away and picking up a notepad.

“That’s £196, lot 12D’s free – just follow the signs,” she said in an uninterested, bored voice, waving lazily toward a nearby crossroad further down the road, where a bunch of signs were nailed to a tree.

After paying, with his wife’s wallet – and giving a pained look to said woman – Mr. Zabini navigated the car on a paved path that quickly became surrounded by forest on both sides. As they passed in front of a souvenir shop, the man was quick to point out something that he had ‘seen’ in the total opposite direction, distracting her just long enough for them to get by.

“Mom has a bit of a spending problem...” Blaise had once told him two years ago, back in Gringotts, Harry remembered with a mental smirk.

After rolling past a tall willow tree whose falling leaves gently rubbed against the top of the car, patiently waiting for a couple to walk across the path and going past a tall oak, Mr. Zabini found their lot, parked, and stopped the engine.

Lot 12D, as was indicated on the small wooden post near the entrance, was a small but very beautiful artificial meadow. A line of trees of various kinds separated it from the two neighboring fields, giving a sense of privacy while not completely isolating them. In the center of the field was a small circle of stones surrounding a spot of sand and ashes. Someone had recently used it, if the fresh-looking partially burned logs proved anything.

Unpacking their tents immediately revealed a problem. There were only two of them, and both were for two persons.

“Mr. Zabini and I can sleep in the same one,” Harry proposed.

“No, no, no.” Mrs. Zabini interrupted, frowning and taking one of her husband’s hands. “We’re here so Dario can relax, so *I’m* going to be the one sharing the tent with him.”

“And what about us?” Blaise asked, sharing a look with Harry. The boy had nothing against sharing a tent with her, but...

“Well, you’ll share the other tent,” Mrs. Zabini replied, grinning cheerfully and a tad impishly, “and your tent will be over there while ours will be here, so if you two decide to do something, Dario won’t hear and won’t wake up.”

“M-MUM!!!” Blaise gasped, her face flushing a darker red than her hair.

...it was going to be a tad awkward.

“Elmira,” Mr. Zabini frowned disapprovingly, though his amused smile did not vanish. “That’s not the right way to get me to relax.”

“Hmm?” The woman grinned like a Cheshire cat and hugged him, one of her hand doing circles on his chest. “Are you sure, love?”

“That is not helping *some* of me relax.” Mr. Zabini replied, his cheeks taking a rosy tint.

Both Blaise and Harry’s faces turned an interesting shade of red.

“Muum...” Blaise whined under her breath, apparently wishing her mother wouldn’t flirt with her father in her presence.

“It’s like a *massage*,” Mrs. Zabini purred playfully, still grinning and oblivious to her daughter’s plea. “The muscle has to be *tense* for the cure to work...” Her voice suddenly returned to normal as she turned toward the two bright red kids. “Now, how about we *mount* those tents?”

Mr. Zabini let out a groaned sigh, although his smile had yet to shrink.

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It took them the better part of an hour to put the tents up properly. The reason why was that, while Mrs. Zabini had apparently *some* idea of how to handle herself in the wild – no pun intended... ok, maybe just a *little* – she was apparently not used to putting them up the Muggle way. As for Mr. Zabini, he was from the city. It seemed the only thing he *did* know how to do is make a fire.

Mrs. Zabini had not changed her mind about their bedding arrangements by the time the night had come. Fortunately, both children simply reverted to their Christmas holiday habits and slept in their pajamas. Harry was eternally grateful that Blaise did not snore. He noticed, unfortunately, that she fought in her sleep. The next morning, he had an unexplainable bruise on his left leg, where a particularly sharp kick had hit him. He had not slept well at all.

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“My, my,” Mrs. Zabini chuckled as soon as she saw him, the next day. “Someone didn’t get much shut-eye...” Her tone turned impish, “is it because you slept so close to Blaise and had to hold yourself not to do anyt—”

“Mum, stop that!” Blaise whined, her face red. “We’re not together!”

Mrs. Zabini sniffed theatrically. “Fine, please excuse this poor, aging mother trying to find a proper boyfriend for her only daughte---”

“MUM!!” Said daughte--- whined loudly again, her face burning redder.

Bleary and blushing, Harry decided that dealing with the Zabini matriarch this early in the morning could only be dangerous and went to Mr. Zabini’s side instead. The man was sitting on a log by the rather weak flames, holding a pincer-like device evidently made to toast bread over a fire, which is exactly what it was being used for. The Muggle man gave him a smile and a nod, distracting his attention from the soon-to-be toasts for only a second.

“So, what are we going to do today?” He asked, more attempting to change the subject than really wanting to know.

“Well, it depends,” Mrs. Zabini replied, looking up at the fair sky. “If it stays like that, we could visit the beach.”

“Beach?” Blaise perked up. “Like a *swimming* beach?”

“No, a skating one, I heard they’re real popular this summer,” her mother retorted playfully, grinning and gently tugging at her hair. “Yes, swimming, you insatiable goldfish.”

Harry resisted the frown threatening to darken his face. He had seen the beach before... on TV and in pictures, and the Dursleys had once gone there for a reason he couldn’t remember. They had complained about it for weeks afterwards. Especially Dudley, but then, he would complain about *anything* that would take him away from his precious television. He wasn’t exactly sure of what went on there, but he knew that having sand between his toes would be downright *dangerous* for the health; what if it managed to get in the bloodstream? What if, because of that, she ended up with a stone in the kidney and having to take a fifteen thousand pounds surgery that would undoubtedly complicate – it always does on the telly – and kill her?

Yes, Petunia had been a tad bit hysterical.

And the other problem was: he had never learned how to swim. The puddles Dudley and his gang had enjoyed throwing him in a few years ago just hadn’t been deep enough, and the Dursleys had decided not to bring him to the pool – what if the water turned into chocolate milk?

Evidently, Dudley hadn’t been told this or Harry would have gone swimming quite often.

“Is something wrong, Harry?” Mr. Zabini’s calm voice broke into his daydreaming.

“Er?” The boy wittily returned, finding the three Zabinis’ attention on him. Blushing, he admitted, “I... er... I can’t swim.”

“It’s not a problem,” Mrs. Zabini said with a shrug. “Beaches are never very deep, unless you head far enough. You’ll be able to stand up. Blaise will watch over you, won’t you?”

The girl didn't look like she was entirely agreeing. Apparently, she didn't want to stay in the shallow parts. Seeing his friend's day being darkened by his fault, Harry quickly stammered that he didn't have a swimming suit, either.

"That's all right, I'll help you buy a new one at the campground's general store," Mr. Zabini said, smiling gently. "I needed to get more firewood anyway. This batch is a bit old."

As he said that, he picked up a long, already partially burnt stick and gave a poke to the tallest burning log, which collapsed pitifully in a shower of sparks.

He let out a discouraged sigh, inspecting his toasts. "Well, it sounds like golden is about as good as we'll get. Toasts?"

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After the toasts were finished, Mr. Zabini went in his tent and fetched the map his wife had picked up the previous day. Consulting the wireless - with a tap of Mrs. Zabini's wand and a few words - had given them a bleak weather forecast: It was going to rain some time that day. Blaise's face had darkened considerably. However, the rest of the week was going to be sunny.

"Don't worry, Blaise," her father said, smiling gently. "We'll go tomorrow."

"What about my swimsuit?"

"We'll buy it today," The man replied. "Tomorrow is Sunday and I'm not too sure if it'll be open."

"You'd better hurry up at it," Mrs. Zabini noted, looking up at the darkening skies. Already a faint smell of ozone could be sensed in the air. "That is, unless you want to run around in the rain."

Her husband smiled and nodded. A few minutes later, Mr. Zabini got up, gave a quick kiss goodbye to his wife and guided Harry away from the site, reading the map as he went.

The general store stood out from the rest of the campground simply from the fact that it did not seem to be in natural wood or stone. Plastic white horizontal paneling covered the outside walls, along with large front windows, a simple partial glass-door and an old-looking, cracked and faded sign announcing it over the surrounding trees. The inside was roomy, welcoming and neatly organized; Harry and Mr. Zabini had very little difficulty finding the swimsuits (mostly because of the flashiness of the nearby female swimwear section) and the changing booths, just beside it.

Their choice was also simple: Green trunk with a black waistband. Harry simply picked the first one that fit – and was of a decent color (“Electric pink?! Who’d pick *that?!?*”) – and tried it on in the booth.

Mr. Zabini nodded and smiled at him when he came out. “Is that all?”

His voice had sounded almost hopeful. Amused, Harry nodded in acknowledgement. There was no use in wasting more time in the store if they had what they wanted, right?

After picking a bundle of firewood from the store – again, the first suitable – Harry and Mr. Zabini walked back to their lot, Harry wearing his normal clothes and carrying his swimsuit in his right hand. He could have sworn he heard Mr. Zabini was chuckling to himself along the way.

Now that he thought about it, Harry didn’t know Mr. Zabini all that much. Sure, he had lived in his house for the last five weeks, but it seemed like the man was always at work. Harry didn’t even know what he did for a living, either. In fact, as far as he remembered, this was the longest time he had spent alone with him. He *did* know Mrs. Zabini a lot – she didn’t work and spent most of her time playing with and watching over him and Blaise, when she was not critiquing Fudge over the wireless or taking care of the house (what she could, anyway), but he had never had a real conversation with Mr. Zabini.

He didn’t quite know how to start a conversation, though. Trying to push his inspiration, he looked up at the man, who was still smiling. Now that Harry tried, he really *could* hear him chuckling.

“What’s so funny?” Harry asked.

Mr. Zabini looked down to him with his eternally calm black eyes and replied, in good humor, “I had almost forgotten that shopping could actually be a simple thing, living with Elmira and Blaise...”

“Blaise shops a lot?” He didn’t know that.

The man shook his head. “Not a lot, but whenever both of them go at it together, they can spend *hours* trying to choose what looks better on each other, or finding things that they suddenly *absolutely* need.” He chuckled. “Blaise really admires her mother, see. As much as she criticizes Elmira and her lack of maturity, she does her best to act like her, at times. It’s almost funny.”

“Yeah, Blaise wants to work as an auror, too...” Harry mused out loud, remembering what his friend had seen in the mirror of Erised.

“Hmm?” Mr. Zabini questioned, turning to him. “I didn’t know that, how do you know?”

“Er...” Harry gave a heavily edited version of their discovery of the mirror, which did not involve any broken rules or capes of Invisibility. Mr. Zabini smiled and shook his head.

“The more I think I know about this magic stuff, the more I learn that I don’t...” He mused, chuckling.

Harry knew perfectly how the man felt; as helpful as Draco and Blaise were to explain things in the wizarding world, there were still many times when he found himself wondering how to make something work, or heard of something that he didn’t know, yet that every other magical child did. For a moment, he wondered how Mr. Zabini had reacted to learning about the wizarding world, but pushed the question down.

“I guess it’s a good thing I only work in the this world,” the man continued airily, looking up at the fair skies. “I’d be completely lost if I had to handle magical things, too...”

Curious, Harry asked: “What do you do, anyway?”

“Do? You mean, at work?” At his nod, the man replied, “I’m a lawyer. One of the top of my company, actually.”

“Oh.”

The conversation ended there.

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By the time they arrived to their camping lot, the first few drops of rain were already falling. Mrs. Zabini and Blaise had installed impervious covers on top of the tents, and both called after them from the biggest one.

Few minutes after they had taken cover inside the tent, the rain began in earnest. Most of the rest of the day was spent wishing the rain would go away, playing cards: Old maid, blackjack and –to Mr. Zabini’s discontentment- poker, of which Mr. Zabini was a frighteningly good player; Harry simply could not tell anything out of his unchanging serene smile, and no bluff managed to get past.

By the time the rain stopped, the air had gone much too cold for them to consider going to the beach. The sun was on the verge of setting. The first few attempts to light up a fire were met with dismal failure, but after a quick drying charm – camouflaged carefully as an attempt to poke the logs with a very small stick – the wood burned easily, as if the rain had never fallen. A neighbor that asked about their technique was met with the response that they had simply hidden the logs in the tent, thus keeping them dry.

Supper was quickly eaten, accompanied by roasted marshmallows. Harry and Blaise amused each other at trying to get their marshmallows as close as possible to the embers without burning them. Some time after Blaise’s stick caught fire and ended the game, Mrs. Zabini’s head fell on her husband’s shoulder, which signaled that perhaps it was time to consider going to sleep. To his amusement, the woman protested a bit and mumbled a "ten more minutes..." as her husband picked her up - with some difficulties.

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Harry had to admit that sleeping in a tent was more comfortable than the cupboard under the stairs. It certainly wasn't as cramped and he had yet to find a single spider. However, it was by no means as comfortable as the guests' bed... *his* bed, at the Zabini's. There was no mattress, for example, and the spongy pseudo-mattress on which his sleeping bag was laid didn't stop that bump on the ground at the small of his back from bugging the heck out of him. Oh, and, of course, there was Blaise and the fact that she seemed to be watching a kickboxing match in her dreams.

...strange, she was oddly inactive tonight. Maybe yesterday had been a fluke?

Curious, he turned around under his covers – incidentally bumping his elbow against the offending lump of something underneath the tent – to face his friend, expecting to see her calmly curled in her sleeping bag. Not to see her chestnut eyes wide open, staring straight up, her arms idly crossed behind her head. Evidently, she was awake.

She gave him a small glance, barely for a second before looking back up again.

"Can't sleep?" she asked. Though her voice was barely a whisper, it came loud and clear in the relative silence of the outdoor night.

"Uh..." Harry intelligently replied, staring at her. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

She smiled gently at his question and pointed up at the overhead mosquito-net. The full moon was plainly visible. "I just can't stop looking at it," she explained. "It's beautiful."

Oh, a full moon. He remembered what she had told him, the previous year, back at the Burrow: "*I've always felt calmer during full moon nights.*"

"If I told Draco you like to stargaze, he'd think I need to see Madam Pomfrey." Harry noted.

The girl chuckled. "I guess it does seem hard to believe, doesn't it..."

Harry smiled in agreement. She didn't even see it.

"When I was a kid, I did this once a month..." she said, her voice set in a gentle whisper. "I'd go outside and stay up late to look at it... And I've never felt bored once. I can't see it as well in London or at Hogwarts – our dormitory windows are on the wrong side,"

Blaise continued, on the same unnervingly calm tone, after a short pause. "But out here, the view is perfect. All that's missing is some water for it to reflect down... Just once, it would be nice to see it over the lake, from one of the cliffs..."

The boy stayed silent. To be honest, this calm Blaise, whom he had 'met' the previous year, unnerved him a bit; he didn't know how to handle her. For an instant, he wondered if Mrs. Zabini went through the same thing, but then dismissed the idea as he remembered the previous year, when she had fallen drunk in the Burrow. And plus, Blaise had told him quite clearly that she was *never* calm.

"What are you thinking?" Blaise's voice cut through his musing as her eyes – or at least, the left one, which was the only one he could see – turned to stare at his.

"Your mum," He replied, feeling that: 'How weird you are when you get like this' wouldn't be appreciated.

She gave him a puzzled look, as if wondering how he had managed to go from the full moon to her mother, before shrugging. "What about her?"

Turning to lay on his back, Harry answered, "It's nothing, forget it."

He heard Blaise's body shift the sleeping bag with a ruffle of clothing, then felt a prodding finger touch just below his ribs.

"You'd better not be thinking bad things about my mum, Harry Potter," she mock-threatened, glaring at him with playful eyes.

He chuckled. "Never, she might hear me." He replied just as playfully, prompting a snort from the girl.

"Good, don't forget who taught me how to duel. She could wipe every floor with both of us, then move on to the driveway and the street." She grinned proudly.

Harry nodded. "Well, she is an Auror."

"Was." Blaise corrected. "From what dad said, she left the force about a year after having me."

"Why? If she's so good, then..."

"I don't know... maybe she decided to use what sense of responsibility she has and quit because I was there... or maybe she just wanted to spend all her time watching over me while I grew up..." She shrugged. "There's no telling, with mum."

Harry nodded. The more time he spent around Mrs. Zabini, the more surprised he became. He *had* seen her act serious and mature, generally whenever it was needed. Outside of a crisis, however, she seemed to have the mental age of a teenager, as if her mind had stubbornly decided to stay at fifteen. In all the time he had spent with the Zabinis, he had not seen her work once. He knew she was an amazing fighter and that she had once been an Auror, but except for that, her past was a mystery.

And where did Blaise's father fit in all this? The poor man was not only the moneymaker of the family, but he was also the cook, seeing as his wife was hopeless in the kitchen. Harry knew they loved each other; the shameless flirting they had shared when they had settled in the camping lot had told him all he needed to know about that. But quite honestly, Harry didn't know if, had he been in Mr. Zabini's position, he would have the same patience.

"Now, what are you thinking?" Blaise's abnormally calm voice cut into his thoughts once again.

"Erm... your dad, actually." Harry replied.

"You're wondering why he stays with her?" Blaise asked while sitting up a bit, her already a bit messed, mid-back hair framed by the moonlight. Her chestnut eyes stared into his.

Feeling sheepish, Harry nodded and scratched the back of his head, rumpling his too-long ebony hair in the process. That wasn't necessarily a good thing to ask to a friend. He was relieved she had asked the question for him, thought. Damn his curiosity.

"Well, they love each other," Blaise started off, lifting a finger, as if to demonstrate a point. "That's a big plus. Plus, dad has the patience of a cat and can take pretty much anything in stride. I think he'd be able to burst out laughing if someone told him the world was about to end. Mom told me he just nodded and said he knew it when she told him she was a witch." She grinned proudly. "That's one of the reasons why he's such a great lawyer; the other side just can't shake his confidence."

"He's good, then?"

She nodded. "The best."

Harry smiled a bit; of course she'd say that, be it the truth or not.

"But wouldn't he be happier... I mean..." He halted himself, feeling like he was setting his feet in a minefield. Blaise gave him a cross look, but shrugged; normally, he knew, she would have belted him in defense of her mother.

"Without her? No, way." She replied, stressing the last two words by drawing them out. "To be honest, I think both of them are just perfect for each other – and not just because I'm their daughter. He's patient, responsible and nice, but he can get wrapped up in his work and it's tough to pull him out, sometimes. I think her childishness is like his breath of fresh air for him."

Harry nodded in understanding. A yawn later, he decided that it was plenty too late to do any more talking. After saying "good night", Harry closed his eyes, relaxed and soon fell asleep.

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Chapter 2: The scar

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Birds.

There are quite a few annoying things about birds.

First, they fly. Since the birth of civilization, man has tried to copy the feat and has only managed it in the last century. And while we were attempting to fly – usually with very amusing-looking contraptions – they just looked down, making merry loops in the air and twittering down musical laughs as those ten-winged ‘planes’ crashed spectacularly from a daring altitude of a foot and a half.

Second, well, like every other living being, they need to... evacuate. Exactly how much tax money goes into cleaning those toilet-statues every year? Granted, they are usually of old politicians who are quite used of having sh... being spread on their names, but still...

And third... the most irritating thing about birds...

*****COO-COO!!*****

“Hmhhrrggghh...” Harry groaned as a cheerful cuckoo announced the new morning for all to hear all over the campground. Unfortunately, the branch it decided to do so on just happened to be just over his and Blaise’s tent.

“Five more minutes...” The girl protested, trying to pull the sleeping bag over her head, quite unsuccessfully since her own weight held

the bottom part down under her, stopping it from being pulled any higher.

*****COO-COO!!*****

Verbally cursing the damned bird and wishing he could do it literally – the world would probably benefit from a muted cuckoo bird – Harry unzipped his sleeping bag and took it off, then slid out of his ‘bed’ carefully as to not wake Blaise more than the bird had already done while smoothing his ruffled pajamas.

“Morning.” Blaise’s voice told him how futile his silence had been. The girl was sitting up and trying to rub the sleep out of her eyes, her hair a mess, but not as bad as it normally was, proof of the previous night’s full moon.

*****COO-CO--*****

“Ah, Shurrap!!”

*****THOK!*** ***KWAAAK!!*****

The sound of a rock hitting a tree, of the bird flying away and the following colorful expletives told them quite a few things; Mrs. Zabini was also awake, she was not happy, she had thrown a rock and the guilty party had unfortunately escaped unharmed. Harry and Blaise shared an amused look as the girl’s mother described the bird’s ancestry. Strange, it hadn’t sounded like an odd cross between a pot-headed Augrey and a feathered female dog of questionable intellect.

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It was a typical morning, at least as typical as the Zabinis on a camping ground were. Mr. Zabini was digging into their supplies, getting the toasts, jams and butter they had packed before leaving. As for Mrs. Zabini, she was *trying* to start the fire. However, it seemed nobody had told her that blowing on the embers was more helpful than threatening them.

Looking up, Harry saw that there wasn't a single cloud anywhere in the sky. The sun, barely peeking above the trees surrounding their lot,

was already spreading heat that promised to become more intense as the day went on. As soon as she noticed this, Blaise's lips turned upwards into a victorious grin.

"Does that mean we're going to swim?" She asked her mother, who seemed to be satisfied of the weak wisps of smoke escaping from the pile of paper and bark set underneath a pyramid of logs.

Mrs. Zabini gave a look at the sky before nodding. "If it stays like that, yes," she replied, just as she noticed the smoke had gone out. "Argh!! Harry, come over here, please..."

Few minutes later, with Harry's help, Mrs. Zabini had started a decent fire. By Harry's help, I mean that he got in the neighbors field of vision so she could cast a drying charm on the logs and set them on fire magically.

"And once more, magic triumphs over nature." The woman said with a grin while her husband heated their breakfast. With a mocking grin, she bent down look at the flames from a foot away. "How do you feel about that, little logs? Oh, right, you're *burning* in anger about it, right?"

Harry resisted an urge to sigh. Blaise didn't.

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After breakfast, Mrs. Zabini and Blaise both ducked in the biggest tent of the two to put on their swimsuits. Harry and Mr. Zabini quickly did the same in the other one. True to form, they were finished long before the former two finally exited their tents. Blaise's body was mostly hidden by a long shirt with an oversized neckhole, and the normally elbow-length sleeves went all the way down to her wrists.

Mrs. Zabini came out with a similar shirt, although it fit her much more snugly than it did Blaise. The bottom piece of her own red bikini was plainly visible and the neck hole revealed only a small and prudish triangle of skin in front of her neck. After picking up some pre-planned backpacks and stuffing the towels and necessary items in them, they left for the beach.

“Did you two *have* to take *my* shirts?” Mr. Zabini wondered. His question remained unanswered.

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Harry had never been to the beach before. He had seen pictures, heard – horror – stories about it from the Dursleys, seen it in TV shows, but never in person. And now, he was staring at it. The real thing.

And he couldn't believe his eyes.

‘And here I thought the lake was big...’

The sea was an endless, constantly moving mass of pure blue water. It stretched across the horizon with a perfectly flat line, managing to look both dull and wonderful at the same time. Between them and it was the beach; another sea, but this time of sand, stretching far on every side and stopped by rocky outcroppings and picket-fence barriers. Wave after wave of water crashed against the sandy bank, filling the air with a soothing rhythmic sound. High overhead, a flock of seagulls was singing and flying, sometimes diving down on the sand to search through an unsuspecting picnic box that an unfortunate someone had made the mistake of abandoning there.

It was bursting with activity; close to them, a woman was laying face down on a towel, tanning her back. A group of children were building a sandcastle while a little girl in a neon green one-piece whined loudly about a shovel. An ice cream seller was trying to satisfy a sizable crowd of youngsters, although he looked like he wished he could sample a piece of his merchandise instead of selling it away.

Standing beside Harry, the two adults just nodded at the sight and scanned the beach with their eyes to find a spot to lay down their things. They seemed to choose the same one on a wordless common accord and began to walk there. And as for Blaise...

He found the shirt she had been wearing draped over his head a second later, then felt a rough shove as a backpack rammed into his stomach and fell to the ground before hearing his friend's voice yell out, “Last one in the water is a dirty troll!!”

“H-HEY!” Harry protested, struggling against his cotton confines, finally pulling them off the glare at the girl. “No fair!”

The Slytherin girl pulled her tongue at him over her shoulder and let out a loud raspberry that somehow managed to be heard all the way to him.

Sighing at her antics, Harry picked up the fallen backpack and carried both it and his own over to where Mr. and Mrs. Zabini had chosen to set down, a nice, flat and sunny spot near the lifeguard’s chair. As he came closer, he could hear the woman’s voice protesting at something her husband had said.

“Don’t worry, our things will be safe there,” She was saying, “you’re going swimming even if I have to drag you across the beach and throw you in the water, Dario.”

The man sighed in defeat, though his smile did not vanish. “Fine.”

Mrs. Zabini’s grin turned impish. “Perfect.” One of her arms disappeared in the sleeve of her shirt a second before she pulled it away.

Her swimsuit was not, as he had thought, a bikini. If it could be called anything, it would be ‘a bunch of strings holding some cloth at the important spots’. Her curvy, slim body was revealed nearly completely and, Harry thought while blushing furiously, she would have turned less heads had she not been wearing it.

Running a hand through her mid-back dark red hair, Mrs. Zabini smirked impishly and purred naughtily, “Watch out, boys, Elmira’s in town.” After seeing her husband’s cross look, she quickly added, “and unfortunately for you, she’s strictly non-touch material.”

“Uh?” Harry blinked and stared.

“Isn’t it a bit... er...” Mr. Zabini protested weakly, pointing at the tied up string holding the bottom piece in place. “What if it snaps?”

“Don’t you worry,” She replied, purposefully bending down toward her husband and revealing her ample cleavage, “I’ve cast a you-know-what on it. It’s *not* going to snap.”

“B...But...”

“Well, let’s go! Blaise is waiting,” Mrs. Zabini cut into her husband’s weak protests, grinning and pointing at where her daughter was waving wildly in the water, calling after them.

As the woman walked bare-foot on the sandy beach toward the sea, swaying her hips provocatively while looking over her shoulders at Mr. Zabini, Harry looked at her. He knew he had seen it... It hadn’t been his imagination...

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...There was a large, jagged scar, as thick as his hand, running over her left flank, from the front to her back.

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As hard as Blaise tried, Harry did not manage to learn how to do anything in the water but sink like a stone, nor did he feel compelled to get out of the relatively warm shallow water and further out into the sea. His mind just wasn’t into it enough and, after she gave up, he returned to the towels to think.

Harry had spent more than his fair share of time in the infirmary. He knew perfectly what kind of miracles Poppy Pomfrey, the school’s nurse, was capable of doing. He had wound up with a rib through his lungs the previous year, when a rigged Bludger had rammed into him during a Quidditch match – and he still didn’t know what had happened, although he had a faintly good idea it had something to do with a certain House elf (that had tried to get him run over by the carriages on the first school day). Yet, the next morning, he had been fit enough to stand and walk on his own.

Except for the one on his forehead – which was *hardly* a usual one – Harry had never seen a witch or wizard with a scar. His pet theory was that it was only because of its peculiar nature that he still had it.

Mrs. Zabini, he knew, was pure-blooded, therefore, she would have always had access to a mediwizard, all her life. He also knew she had been an Auror in the past, but was now unemployed. Was this the reason? Had she stopped because she had been injured?

Perhaps it was, but he knew she was far from harmless from the way she had handled the Dursleys two years ago and Lockhart, just one month earlier. So then, why wasn't she working? Maybe Blaise had been right; she had stopped to take care of her daughter. Maybe she actually worked while they were away, at Hogwarts.

And there was still the question of just *what* had made it. From its shape, it looked like something had run through her side and opened her up. He didn't doubt for a second that a Muggle would have died on the spot. Probably the only reason why she would still be alive would be because someone had healed her quickly.

But then, why would there still be a scar?

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When the sun was about to set and a cool wind settled over the beach, Mrs. Zabini called after Blaise to get out of the water. After being forcefully extracted by her mother, the shivering girl was wrapped in Harry's warm body-heated and relatively dry towel and forced to slip on her sandals; she apparently wanted to get back in.

"Come on, mum! The water was warmer!" She protested through the clattering of her teeth while hugging the towel tighter. "You usually let me swim late when we're at auntie Esmeralda's!"

"First, you're used to swimming in the Mediterranean sea. That's a *lot* warmer than this. Plus, she coupled a heating ward with in the water with a permanent cleaning charm."

"B-B...But..." Seeing that, no matter how hard she tried, her own body was betraying her on how cold she felt, she wisely decided to shut up.

"Second, Esmeralda's house is a few dozen feet away from the shore, so you can get warm faster. Now stop complaining."

She had regressed to a small intermittent shudder by the time they reached their campground. Mr. Zabini was quick to start a fire, around which they heated themselves and roasted marshmallows until Blaise's head started to tilt on Harry's shoulder, while Mrs. Zabini downright fell asleep on her husband's side. Soon after, they retired for the night, and Harry hadn't dared ask anything.

The enormous jagged scar on his friend's mother's flank remained a mystery that kept him awake and staring up at the top of his tent for hours, that night.

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Chapter 3: Sirius Black

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Faint breathing came to the captive's ears. It was not its own, nor was it its imagination. In the other cell, laying on the thin, dirty cot that served as a bed for the prisoners, its companion - a talkative and pretty sixteen years old young woman named Lily Evans, had came in a few... oh... days ago? Weeks? For all they knew, it could have been a few merely long-seeming hours. With no sunlight and no guard shifts, there was no way of telling. The captive had come to calculate time in 'meals', but even then, that was unreliable. Every now and then, the guards would 'accidentally' forget to bring their food.

"Hmmh... no..."

Apparently, Lily was dreaming. Based on the way she fought against the thin and rough brown blanket that seemed to have been made to keep as much humidity in and as much heat out as possible, she was having a nightmare. Then again, the sadness and despair that flooded out of her like emotional waves, was a much better indication.

The captive concentrated a bit on powers she had not used in a long, long time. Warm orange light covered both cells even if it was barely strong enough to allow one to read. The prisoner's eyes had become so adjusted to the darkness that any light seemed blinding. Ignoring the light, the captive reached out, soothing the sleeper until the poor girl's emotions changed... and a faint blush appeared on her cheeks.

"Oohmm... mmm... James..."

It lewdly smirked in satisfaction. A small, pointed fang glittered in the fading orange light.

Now THAT was more like it.

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"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!"

For any normal newly thirteen years old child, those two words were source of elation and happiness. They signified that another stage toward adulthood had been completed, another philosophical step toward being wise had been taken and, perhaps more importantly than anything else, the promise of presents that were to come.

However, if there was one thing to note about those two particular words, it was that they made a very bad wake-up call.

Actually, just about any loud words shouted in the ear of just about anyone at just about any moment makes a very bad wake up call.

The sleeper's eyes shot open in surprise as his ears rang. His head shot forward as he reflexively sat up, his body instinctively intent on making him as aware as possible as quickly as it could to face the unknown threat.

...well, that was the intention of the body, and the reason why such a reflex existed in his system.

To the natural reaction's credit, it *did* manage to bring Harry *very* awake, after his skull connected against his friend Blaise's forehead, worsening the headache that he been induced by having sound waves bash through his brain with hammers and other concussion objects.

The result was a loud exclamation of pain on both sides, a victimized boy grabbing his forever scarred forehead and a young teenage girl ending up sprawled on her beddings – no punny overdose intended, the wording is a mere coincidence.

And it was to this scene that July 31st 1993 began for Harry Potter.

Ten relatively eventless days had passed since that day at the beach, and not once did Harry feel bored. They had spent this time doing

virtually every activity available in the camp, and went swimming two more times, at Blaise's insistence. The girl *loved* water, it seemed. Harry didn't care much for it himself; human beings were made to stay on dry ground, after all.

He had, for the first time of his life, noticed the arrival of his birthday. Not from any anticipation on his part, but from the fact that Mrs. Zabini had forgotten that tents don't block sounds at all, and had discussed it to Blaise, while Mr. Zabini 'kept him occupied', effortlessly eavesdropping with him with a smile of amusement on his face.

And today was it. Today was the *not* day they were *not* going to the restaurant to *not* celebrate his birthday, and Blaise and her mother had made sure to *not* keep very quiet so he would *not* know. Note the double-negative.

...they had been quite loud, actually. As hard as Harry had tried, he hadn't managed to stay unaware of their secret plans. As far as he remembered, though, none of them included being woken up by Blaise at the crack of the morning with a crack of his eardrums and of his head.

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Blaise had apparently been awake for a while; her clothes were clean and her bed was – relatively – made. Spending eleven days in close quarters with her had made him aware of a great load of things about her, including the fact that she tended to be vocal in her sleep, as well as physical, thus her sleeping bag usually ended up looking like Professor Snape's head on a bad hair day.

"Are you ready?" She asked, grinning gleefully, though her hand was still touching her reddish forehead.

"For what?" He faked ignorance. His head felt like it had been cracked like a coconut, his hair was a mess – as usual – his ears were still ringing and he was still in his pajamas. Did he *look* ready?

"We're goi—That's a surprise!" Blaise quickly corrected herself after remembering he wasn't supposed to know.

Chuckling, Harry removed the sleeping bag that covered him. Taking this as her cue, Blaise quickly left to let him get dressed.

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The sky outside was cloudier than it had been all week. It seemed the long streak of sunny days was approaching an end. The wind whipped at the leaves, covering the woods with a shuffling sound. However, the sun still welcomed him brightly through an opening in the clouds as soon as he stepped out of the tent and into the campground.

In the middle of the ground, Mr. Zabini was busily preparing some toasts over the burning orange embers with small yellow flames dancing among them. Mrs. Zabini was digging into the bag of dressings they had brought along. As for Blaise, she was entertaining herself by poking the embers with a stick and watching the sparks fly up, trying to make as many of them as possible.

After breakfast, which was interrupted by an entertaining fight between the two Zabini girls over who would get the last of the strawberry jam, Harry and Blaise spent some time exploring the campground, shooed away by the adults while they *didn't* go and buy his present, just as it was *not* planned. The girl was careful not to bring him anywhere near the campground, even if standing on the small arched wooden bridge and trying to spot frogs in the murky little stream underneath was abysmally boring.

Finally, noon came and, as *not* told by the plan, Blaise pulled him back to the camp. Mr. and Mrs. Zabini were waiting in the car when they arrived. He had to admit that, had he not heard it beforehand, he would have been surprised. As it was, he put on a surprised front – so they wouldn't be disappointed – and climbed on the back seat. Nemesis coiled himself between him and Blaise, refusing to stay cooped in the tent. Mrs. Zabini had assured Harry that the snake wouldn't be out of place, wherever they went.

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It took about thirty minutes to drive from the camping ground to Liverpool, and ten more to get to their destination. The restaurant

they had decided to bring him to was... disappointing, to say the least. At least, at first sight, it was. Small, shady and looking dilapidated, it bore weak flickering purple neon tubes over its boarded up windows, announcing, for all to see, 'Hardy's Humble Hut'. The name was extremely tacky and, Harry guessed, did not invite anyone inside. In fact, its intention seemed to be quite the opposite; surrounding the little shack-like mostly concrete building were a rich-looking luxury hotel and a flashy five star restaurant. Yet, nobody seemed to look at it twice. Closer looks at passer-bys made him realize nobody looked at it, period.

From the inside, accessible through a banged up rusty metal door – that didn't squeak, thankfully – it was worse. The walls had probably once been white washed, but age or disdain had allowed the color to fade to an ugly yellow. The floor had probably once been made of black and white checkered squares, but it was hard to guess under the layer of grime and dust covering it. Of the six tables spread across the room, only one was still intact and only one was clean enough to consider eating on. Unfortunately, they were not the same one. On the far wall was a large and chipped mirror covered with stains. Sitting by a door leading to the back was a bar, which was apparently better cared for than the rest of the room.

Behind the bar, a gruff-looking, unshaven muscled man with an anchor tattoo on his huge and bare left arm, wearing a dirty camisole stained with unidentifiable substances glared at them.

"Whaddya want?" He snapped roughly.

"A vodka with four full lemons for take out." Elmira replied.

Harry and Blaise shared a disbelieving look. What the...

The barkeep sneered and, surprisingly, simply nodded. "That's strong stuff. Got your ID?"

She whipped her wand out of her sleeve and flicked a few sparks. The man gave a satisfied grunt.

"And them?" He asked, waving at the two teens.

"They're with me. So is he." Mrs. Zabini replied, taking her husband's hand.

The man nodded. "Go in the back. Password is 'Mermaid'. Welcome to The Sporty Snidget." The bored tone in his voice clearly said these words were more forced courtesy than anything else.

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The back room could hardly be described as such. As soon as he laid his eyes in it, it became obvious that the shady, gloomy and dirty atmosphere of the previous room was just a mask to hide the obviously magical bar behind.

The Sporty Snidget had been meant to be a restaurant/pub, a place where witches and wizards could eat and have a good time simultaneously, that much was obvious on first sight. It was a relatively large circular room with wooden walls and floors and wooden beams holding the roof giving it a rustic, comfortable feel. One of the walls was a window bay, from which Liverpool's lively streets were visible. What made no physical sense was that, unless Harry's internal compass was out of whacks, those windows should have given a fairly interesting view of the insides of the neighboring luxury hotel.

Posted up on the walls were moving posters of famed Quidditch player – Harry recognized two of them: the famous "Dangerous" Dai Llewellyn, from his portrait in Quidditch Through the Ages, and Kevin Broadmoor, one of the Falmouth Falcon's most famous beaters, because one could not play in the same team as Marcus Flint and *not* know every single player of the Falcons, past and present, and especially not their neck-breaking – among other things – beaters.

It was filled with square, round, trapeze, pentagonal or dodecagonal tables of various sizes, from the one and a half foot high knee-scrapper on the way to the toilet to that one near the entrance that Mrs. Zabini, whose height hovered around the limit between average and tall, had been easily able to walk under without bending down. Most of them were filled with people who were already eating, although some of them seemed to have come only for the animation.

And there was animation, indeed. In the center of the room was a large 'stage', on which a rather heated translucent miniature Quidditch match between seven dark-green clad ladies with golden talons on their chests and a mixed team wearing emerald-green uniforms with a pair of yellow Ks in front and in the back was being played while the tenants cheered and booed on with the action.

"Last year's season semi-finales." Mrs. Zabini noted, while her husband stared openly at the dangerous-looking game and the miniaturized people riding on brooms. "The Harpies against the Kestrels. A total massacre. 320 to 160."

"At least the Harpies caught the Snitch," Blaise scowled.

Mrs. Zabini nodded. "But their Keeper was green and the Kestrels specialize in having strong chasers and techniques. It didn't help much against the Catapults in the finale, though."

Harry gave a look at Mr. Zabini, who looked thoroughly lost. Harry himself had barely followed the conversation; sometimes, having spent his childhood in the depths of the Muggle world – or more precisely, his cupboard under the stairs – just sucked.

"Um, there's an empty table over there..." Mr. Zabini noted, pointing at a normal-sized, square table near the windows.

Mrs. Zabini shrugged. "Yeah, it's not like we don't already know which team's going to win."

"I don't wanna watch anyway." Blaise noted, watching in apparent agony as Harold Synee made a spectacular throw involving a barrel and tailspin – that Harry doubted he could replicate – and the Harpies Keeper failed to stop the Quaffle.

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Harry was reassured to note that the menus had nothing unusual about them. Well, on a wizard's standards, that is. Normally, menus didn't just pop out of tables as soon as someone sat on the chair in front of them, along with glasses of water – that tasted like raspberries. Pumpkin juice was also announced in the kids meal

section – for years twelve and under; too bad, those chicken nuggets looked tasty – while various brands of Butterbeer and Firewhisky adorned the alcoholic drinks list. As for the desserts...

...well, it was probably safer not to mention them. *They* broke the line between odd and downright weird. There wasn't a picture for that 'chocolate frog spawn pond', and he wasn't sure if he wanted one or not.

"Quarter Chicken, leg." Mrs. Zabini announced, startling Harry. Suddenly, in front of her, her order appeared. Mr. Zabini nearly dropped his glass in surprise.

"Er, yeah, I was about to ask... that..." The man said, staring at the roasted leg, as if expecting it to start jumping around.

...he *had* seen Chocolate frogs before, after all. Perhaps the fear was justified.

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The cheery and loud atmosphere of the Sporty Snidget accompanied Harry through dinner, contagiously making the boy grin. Every once in a while, the volume would rise and fall with the action of the game. Harry found he had difficulties to pull his eyes away from the arena. Quidditch truly was the greatest game in the world.

Blaise's mother had attempted to surreptitiously whisper something to the rather well-endowed barmaid soon after they had started to eat, camouflaging it as a sudden need to visit the toilet. To her credit, the bar was beside the toilets. Harry, however, had followed her with his eyes and had taken about thirty seconds to guess what had been said; Probably something about today being his birthday. At least, he guessed, from the way the barmaid had given him a quick glance with a mischievous grin.

He was right. Almost as soon as he swallowed the last bite of his dinner, a large cake with swirling colors – literally – appeared in his suddenly clean plate. A pint-sized colorful clown rose out of its middle and burst out in a cheerful and very loud rendition of 'Happy birthday'. Fortunately, the song omitted his name, which was a good thing

considering its volume had attracted the attention of everyone in the restaurant. With a little luck, nobody would recognize him.

He couldn't help but let out a relieved sigh when McGrivin threw the Quaffle through the Harpies' left hoop – Blaise groaned in apparent agony – and the patrons' attention was tugged away from the uninteresting, perfectly ordinary, national- hero-in-disguise birthday boy-who-lived, back to the very interesting replayed game from last year's finals.

"Don't worry," Mrs. Zabini said, her voice reaching Harry through the cheers of Kestrel supporters – which formed the vast majority of the room, seeing as there was only one Harpy partisan, and she was sitting beside him, trying to knock herself unconscious by bludgeoning herself on the table – "They won't guess who you are."

"Why not?"

"They expect the boy-who-lived to be some kind of super-hero; the perfect, golden boy who can do anything. After all, he supposedly killed Voldemort, didn't he? Now why would they think that the boy-who-lived would spend his oh-so-important birthday in this perfectly normal restaurant, with a bunch of unknown witches and a Muggle – no offense, hun – wearing a snake around his shoulders and a bandanna over his forehead?"

"Shhe'sss got a point." Nemesis noted.

"Because I don't want to be noticed." Harry replied, taking another sip from his mug of warm butterbeer. That stuff was *good*!

"They don't know that." She said. "They don't know *you*. *They* think you like the praise and being known and recognized everywhere you go. You can thank Dumbledore for convincing the ex-minister *not* to rename Halloween, 'Harry Potter's day'."

Harry choked on his drink at the thought.

The way back was, in one word, loud. An overheard comment on the way out of the restaurant had fired Mrs. Zabini and her daughter in a heated discussion on the faults of mandatory helmets for Quidditch

players – "It's just not as much fun if it's safe!" Mrs. Zabini declared, while her husband gave her an odd look – that Harry absentmindedly followed while listening to the car's radio set. Both of them were against it, but it sounded like both of them wanted to find a better reason why than the other. Outside the clear windows, the city streets of Liverpool gave way to a coastal paved street with an excellent view over the nearby Irish sea. The skies had darkened considerably,

"...inister refused to step down from his position, on the claim that the current economic situation--"

"Bah, politics." Mrs. Zabini's voice snapped while her hand automatically went to the tuner. "Boring, boring, ugh, classica... really boring, talk show... blah, countrymusic,changingreallyquick..." She gave a loud sigh. "Can't get anything interesting on the Muggle stations."

"Not at this time." Mr. Zabini noted.

"Switch to wizard, then?" Blaise suggested.

"Was going to, was going to..." Her wand suddenly seemed to appear in her left hand. Blaise didn't even blink. "Here we go..."

A tap later, the radio set glowed faintly in a dark blue color and began sprouting a vivid publicity praising the merits of some place called Honeydukes.

"A mixed radio?"

"Specially charmed by yours truly." Mrs. Zabini said with a cheerful grin. "Beats bringing the wireless in, and the car's sound system is much better."

"Isn't that totally against Mr. Weasley's law on misuse of Muggle artifacts?" Harry noted.

Her grin froze. "Er... as long as he doesn't suspect it," The woman said with a wink, blushing embarrassedly. "And it helps to have friends in high places. He won't look twice at it."

However, when she turned back to look out her window, Harry, who was behind Mr. Zabini but could see her from the side mirror, noticed she was muttering something. He managed to read a faint 'right?' from her lips.

"...and now, Celestina Warbeck with: 'I flew all night!'"

"Yess!" Mrs. Zabini said, immediately rising the volume.

"We interrupt this broadcast to bring you this special message from the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge."

A string of loud, unladylike curses escaped from her lips, making both of her children pale and her husband nearly switch lane. A familiar-looking coo-coo bird squawked and flew away quickly. In the sea, onboard a large fishing ship, a sailor blushed, though he didn't quite know why.

"My fellow magi, I'm afraid I bring bad news." Fudge's voice began dramatically.

"What, you're never going to step down?" the woman snidely quipped.

"At thirteen hours seven minutes yesterday, there was an escape attempt at Azkaban. Unfortunately, it was successful and the escapee has yet to be found. The prisoner is exceptionally dangerous and is not to be trifled with. If you see him, do not try to face up against him."

"Who the hell is it?!" Mrs. Zabini growled. "Man, he's useless, I mean, you wouldn't have to say it if--"

"The escapee's name is Sirius Black, guilty of serving the dark lord and killing twelve Muggles and one wizard."

Harry saw Mrs. Zabini's face freeze in horror. Her right hand clenched against the door's armrest while her left held her wand in a white-knuckled grip.

"I repeat: Sirius Black is extremely dangerous. Do *not* try to go against him, not even in groups. Warn the ministry of magic if you see

him and we will take the appropriate measures. A more in-depth report will be available in today's Daily Prophet. Thank you for your understanding. Rest assured that this is an isolated incident that will *never* happen again."

The voice gave way to a soft, beautiful melody opening, but Mrs. Zabini quickly reached and shut the volume.

"Elmira?" Mr. Zabini asked. His voice sounded worried, but Harry couldn't see his face.

"Dario, head to the camp. We're going home."

"Elmira? Why—"

"Don't ask questions, just *do it!*" Mrs. Zabini snapped. If Harry didn't know her better, he would have suspected that she was panicking. Since he did, he knew she was. This was the first time he had ever heard her raise her voice against someone of her family, even more so her husband.

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The ride back was silent, though faint mutterings could be heard from Mrs. Zabini, who had yet to let go of her wand and was looking in every direction. Harry frowned; this was highly unlike her. Did she know that prisoner? That... Sirius Black?

'course I know him, I'm the one who caught him...

Though the words had been said about Mr. Malfoy, they managed to give Harry a tentative explanation. Perhaps she had caught *him*, as well, and believed he was after revenge...

...but then, she probably wouldn't have reacted with the fear... no, abject *terror* she was now displaying. Malfoy was at large, after all, and with the political influence he had, he could probably get away with murdering her – not a warming thought in the least. Yet, she had fearlessly faced him with nothing else than anger the previous year, as if perfectly knowing she was the strongest of the two. The only

other explanation he could find was that she knew Black personally. How, though...?

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By the time they reached the camp, the first drops of rain were starting to fall. Blaise had asked if they could just wait it out inside the tents and leave after, but Mrs. Zabini had categorically refused, going as far as snapping at her. It took them about thirty minutes, by which time the rain had picked up into a visible curtain. The woman had *tried* to get into the driving seat, but Mr. Zabini had put his foot down then.

"Listen, Elmira. I don't know why you suddenly want to go home, I don't know how you know that Sirius Black man and I won't push further until we're there. What I *do* know is that you're being rash again, and that you're scaring Blaise. So will you please calm down and let me drive?"

The woman had spared a look at Blaise, who was looking miserable, thoroughly drenched, her pants and hands dirty with mud from when she had wrenched out one of the pikes holding her and Harry's tent to the ground. Harry had to admit he didn't make a better picture; he had slipped on the grass and landed face-first in a forming puddle. Both his bandanna and the arm of his glasses now stuck out of his pant pockets while he tried to make do as much as he could with his poor vision.

Mrs. Zabini sighed and went to the front passenger seat. Mr. Zabini smiled.

"I promise I won't try to drive you to the nut house this time." He added teasingly.

"Shurrup." The woman growled halfheartedly, a smile appearing on her face. "Goof."

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"The authorities have singalled that Black is armed and very dangerous. A green number has been set in place to let anyone who has seen the fugitive signal it immediately."

"They're warning muggles about a runaway wizard?" Harry noted disbelievingly. His years in the wizarding world had clearly indicated there existed a large rift between the two worlds.

"That's how dangerous Black is." Mrs. Zabini said darkly. "No half measures, no playing around." Her lips twisted in a small smirk. "Madam Bones sure knows how to do her job." The smirk vanished into a dark scowl. "That's at least *one* of them."

"Mum? Do you... do you know that guy?" Blaise asked. Harry saw her bite her lower lip in an uncharacteristically meek manner, as if she was afraid her mother would bite her head off again.

Mrs. Zabini was silent for a few seconds, her face turned away from Harry as she looked out the window at the now pouring rain. The car's wipers became the only sound, except for the low rumbling the engine, the scraping sound of the four wheels running against the pavement and the constant thumping of rain against the windshield.

"During the war..." Mrs. Zabini began, "Lily and Potter... Harry's mother and father, fought alongside Dumbledore, against Voldemort's forces. It would have been a very simple war if it had just been a fight of black against white, but..." She sighed wistfully. "Loyalties changed or were faked, there were plenty of traitors and spies on both sides. You could never be sure of anyone you didn't know personally and well, and even then... Shades of grey, you know. With the proper motivation, just about anybody can stab you in the back.

"Black was a friend of your father's. A very close friend. In fact, they were so close that more than a few mistook them for twin brothers. Even from far away, they could tell what the other was thinking, even without speaking to each other. They made an excellent team."

"B-But..."

"Don't interrupt me, Harry." The woman admonished. Her hands were clenched in tight fists that tugged at the fabric her pants in a white-

knuckled grip; recalling these memories was apparently difficult for her. "I... I knew him well. I was at Hogwarts at the same time as he was. Not in his year, but close enough..."

"Did you... date him?" Blaise asked.

"What? NO!" The woman quickly denied, her face bursting into an embarrassed crimson color. Mr. Zabini chose that moment to clear his throat and pointedly look out the window.

"I mean... I swear, Dario, I... I mean... ok, *fine*. I went out with him *once*," she stressed the word, lifting a single finger, "and it was the worst date of my life. Besides, there aren't many witches who were above the age of fourteen back when he left school that can say they haven't at least dated or fancied him."

"Did you?"

"Who I fancied before I met your father is none of your business, young lady." Mrs. Zabini growled, her cheeks growing red, while Mr. Zabini made a show of reading a passing street sign with much interest. Blaise decided to let it drop with an impish grin.

"So what happened?" Harry asked.

"Oh, he kept staring at Rosmerta's rac—"

"I think he means during the war, Elmira," Mr. Zabini interrupted. His wife's cheeks blossomed into cherries.

"Oh, yeah... where was I... Oh... right." The embarrassedly cheerful tone in her voice vanished as quickly as the happy atmosphere. "He... your parents, soon after they had you, Voldemort targeted them... actually, a little before, but no matter. What's important is that he wanted to kill them, so they hid—"

"It didn't help in the end." Harry noted sourly, fingering his scar.

"It probably would have, if they hadn't been betrayed. I don't know all the details, but it seems like only one person knew where they were hiding."

Harry's throat constricted. What was she saying...?

"W—Who was that person?" Blaise asked nervously, her eyes turning to look at her friend. His fists had clenched, and so had his jaw.

"Black told Voldemort where the Potters were hiding." Mrs. Zabini said. "Essentially, it's his fault they died when they did."

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Harry was silent for the rest of the way, broodingly staring out the window with an unreadable look in his eyes. Blaise had not even tried to talk to him; she had no idea what to say. And so, she did the same thing as he did, watching the rocky fields whiz by behind a thickening curtain of uniform grey rain while absentmindedly rubbing her thumb against the head of Nemesis, who was comfortably coiled on her warm lap.

Her mother had likewise been silent since she had dropped the bomb on her friend. Staring out of the window, looking at the morose curtain of falling water, her eyes had a haunted look Blaise had only seen once before, a few days before Harry's eleventh birthday. Now, however, it was much worse.

It was understandable, though. While Voldemort had been the knife that had killed Harry's parents, Sirius Black had essentially been the guiding hand behind it. If he hadn't betrayed them, betrayed a friend so close they were like brothers, Harry would have probably had many more memories of them... or perhaps he wouldn't even be an orphan.

And now Black was out of prison, doing god knew what. Blaise, being the well-educated half-blood that she was, had heard about Azkaban in the past. The terrible prison from which nobody could escape alive, guarded by terrible guardians that nobody ever spoke of without fear. Even the sanest person in the world was said to have no chance of staying that way after a year in that place, and Black had spent... she didn't know how long exactly, but since she didn't remember ever hearing about it before now, it must have been at *least* over ten years.

Outside, the rocky fields, farms and small woodlands that covered the horizon gave way to the outskirts of London. Ignoring the large, obvious signs that pointed toward downtown, Mr. Zabini controlled the car toward the south, until they had reached the small suburban town of Surrey.

By the time they had reached Privet drive – "Oh, looks like someone decided to become an artist," Blaise noted upon looking at the door of #4 that bore an unflattering scribble of a pink pig bearing the name of 'Dudley' in orange marker - the rain had worsened to the point that, if they had been on the highway, they would have been forced to slow down or stop completely and wait it out. Upon getting out, packing their things out of the car had not even crossed their minds, being replaced by a single, oppressing thought of getting somewhere dry and warm.

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"Finally home." Blaise sighed contentedly while twisting her drenched hair to get the water out. Unnoticed by both, Mrs. Zabini did the exact same motions. Harry absentmindedly nodded before vigorously shaking his head to dry his black locks. Hanging between his outstretched forearms, Nemesis let out a small hiss of protest when he found himself splashed by cold water.

Quickly, Mrs. Zabini removed her shoes, hung her coat on the hanger and ducked in the dining/living room, picking a jar of what Harry recognized as floo powder. For an instant, he considered following her and eavesdropping, but a look from Mr. Zabini made him change his mind.

"Oh, right," the man suddenly said, "I almost forgot, your present."

"Present?" Harry blinked. He was still not used to the word being associated to something of his.

"Elmira bought it, actually. Knowing her, it's..." His hand ducked into the right pocket of his wife's coat, coming out with a small square box between his fingers, "right here. Open it up."

Harry nodded and picked it from his hand before flipping the top part up. Inside the box was a small, familiar-looking golden ball. He barely had time to guess what it was that a pair of insect-like wings slid out of it and began to flap, taking the snitch upwards. Almost reflexively – actually, it was reflexively – Harry snatched it in mid-air. He absentmindedly felt his face move into 'grinning like an idiot' mode.

"Happy Birthday, Harry." Mr. Zabini said, giving him an affectionate pat on the head.

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Chapter 4: Correspondence

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Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was a man of great wisdom. Indeed, it was rumored that the unlikely event of Dumbledore not knowing what to do in a crisis would be a signal for the world to begin undoing itself. So great was everyone's confidence in him that any mistakes that could even lightly be attributed to his part were vehemently pushed to whoever *e/se* could have messed up, or simply down to a bout of bad luck.

However, contrary to popular beliefs, he did make mistakes sometimes. And that morning, he couldn't help but wonder if he had done one in the selection of the staff members of the school, and particularly so of the man sitting before him. Oh, he had absolute confidence in his teaching skills, and his loyalty was doubtless and nearly spotless, but his history had left the man in a peculiar and rather volatile state.

Severus Snape was sitting in the comfy overstuffed seat in front of his desk, in the middle of his 'Museum of Magical Messes', also known as the headmaster's office, as he had done countless times before. For a grown man, he had the strange habit of relying on Dumbledore's advice like a confused child and, as if to counterbalance it, completely ignored everyone else's, much to their chagrin.

This time, however, it was not about a personal problem of his that Severus had ventured into his office. Well, not directly, at least. As it was nearly customary at this time of the year – Dumbledore had once considered marking the day every year to compare his punctuality – he was critiquing the old headmaster's choice for the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. This time, however, he seemed to be especially adamant about it. Even more so than the previous year, and that was saying something.

"I maintain my decision, Severus." He told the potion master.

"I mean... you *know* what he is, professor Dumbledore! He's—"

"A man I respect, a man I trust as much as I do you, a man who can tell a very mean bar joke and that is afflicted with an unfortunate condition—"

"That's putting it mildly." Snape sneered. "He's a bloody *werewolf*, and you're letting him close to the children under your care, Dumbledore! I wonder what the parents will think of you once they learn—"

"If I was bothered in any way by what people think of me, I would never have become headmaster of this school, Severus. You'd be surprised of the letters I receive sometimes. Just last week, there was a funny one that claimed that Herbology was, quote, 'too dangerous and should not be taught to teenagers'. Parents are often too protective of their children..."

"We're not talking about Flesh-eating Brussels sprouts, Dumbledore! We're talking about a *Werewolf*." Snape shot back sharply. "None of them would agree to have their children with—"

"And none of them would agree if I hired a less competent Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, especially not with Sirius Black on the loose." The headmaster countered. Check.

"You could make *me*—"

"And deprive the poor students of learning potions under one of the best masters in Britain? I think I'd receive more complaints from that than anything else."

Snape was perfectly aware of his reputation and thus doubted that fact very much. "I thought you didn't care—"

"I never said I cared about the complaints. However, the students' education is very important to me."

"They won't agree to Lupin either." 'Hah, let him try to counter *that* one!'

"I wouldn't be so sure." Dumbledore lifted his hand, stopping Severus from interrupting him again. "After suffering under Lockhart last year, I believe learning under one of the rare students to have had a grade higher than one hundred and thirty in his Defense Against the Dark Arts OWLs this century will be a blessing."

Check.

Snape seethed and shot Dumbledore a dirty glare. On one hand, he couldn't deny that Remus J. Lupin knew a lot about Defense Against the Dark Arts – hell, had he not hated the man so, he would have acknowledged it and recommended his knowledge to others in need. In Snape's mind, there was no greater praise than this.

However, since he hated Lupin, despised the ground he walked on, would have gladly poisoned the air he breathed – with silver nitrate fumes, preferably before it entered his system – and would have much preferred going through a session of being an experimental torture victim to the sadistic and devilish Bellatrix Lestrange than giving him praise, he felt obligated to object.

"And how do you expect Mr. Lupin would hide his... monthly problem?" Snape jibed, rolling his eyes.

Check against Dumbledore, this time. It wasn't like hiding the fact that you were a werewolf was easy to do if you taught Defense Against the Dark Arts to every student in the school. There seemed to be an unwritten rule saying that no teacher's evening would be spent peacefully without being interrupted by students coming to ask questions or kiss up for better grades – especially Ravenclaws.

...Snape was understandably the greatest exception to this rule, and he was quite proud of that fact. Unless Lupin had done a complete one-eighty since the last time they had seen each other, he was still a big softie that would be bothered every step of the way, and thus would immediately attract attention with his monthly absences.

"Oh, you see, Mister Lupin seems to suffer from poor health in his old age," Dumbledore replied, pretending to read the words from a letter he had been writing before getting interrupted and that had nothing to do with any lycanthropes. "Every once in a while, his sickness

becomes unbearable and he simply cannot be approached or asked to teach."

Counter.

Snape sneered at the words; a fabricated story, no doubt it would stop less clever students' suspicions and satisfy their curiosity. However, he knew it wouldn't last very long for some students... like, say, a certain group of soon-to-be-third years...

...besides. Old age?! They were both only thirty-two!

"Is he going to use the shrieking shack again?" He asked. "How are you going to explain the noise?"

Check.

Dumbledore nodded. "The rowdy ghosts decided to make their comeback."

Counter.

"And his other's side... self-mutilating tendencies?" Snape allowed himself a smirk. There was no way a simple sickness would explain the hideous self-inflicted claw wounds that covered Lupin's body after a transformation.

Check.

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, this is where you come in. I believe you know about the Wolfsbane potion?"

Block...

Huffing as if it was an insult to his intelligence, Severus Snape, Hogwarts' Potion master and one of the best brewers in Britain, whose talents had attracted the attention of illustrious men such as Albus Dumbledore and, unfortunately, Lord Voldemort, immediately nodded. "Of course I have. The theory behind it was my NEWT essay, after all. It's a very difficult and tricky potion that takes five weeks to brew, based on powdered Aconite leaves diluted by---" He stopped,

his normally sharp mind apparently catching up to his usually tame mouth.

"You're... telling me..." Snape began, seething at the thought, "that I'm going to slave over my cauldrons... every month... so this... this... *man*-" any other word would have attracted the old man's ire, "can..."

"Can teach the students how to defend themselves against anything the dark side might send against them." Dumbledore interrupted, smiling serenely. Inwardly, however, he was chuckling. Severus normally had great control over himself, but when it came to potions and having his considerable knowledge of the subject scorned, he tended to overreact.

"Are you saying you don't believe you can manage to brew it properly—"

Feint...

"Of course I can," Snape immediately snapped, insulted, before realizing he had fallen into the old man's trap. "That doesn't mean—"

"Thank you, Severus," A chuckle came from Dumbledore without hampering his polite interruption while Severus raged and cursed him mentally, "I knew I could rely on your cooperation."

...and checkmate.

'Curse you old man...' Snape mentally hissed.

"Hmm... winter is coming early, this year..." Dumbledore trailed off innocently, noticing the sudden chill in the room.

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Pomona Sprout found herself huffing in anger approximately thirty minutes later, after an irate Severus Snape had burst through the doors of her 'office' in greenhouse one and literally ordered her to grow a yearly supply of a list of ingredients as long as her arm.

Honestly, it wasn't like being polite just *once* in his life would kill him...

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The people in the room were staring at him with looks of skepticism in their eyes. He was well renowned for having solved impossible-looking criminal cases through bumbling around stealthily and hiding his genius until the very end, only to reveal he had figured out absolutely *everything* in a certainly unorthodox manner. They knew him as the famous private detective 'sleeping beauty' Gilderoy Mouri. Currently, the blonde man was in his 'mystery-solving pose', slumped against a chair, eyes closed and his breathing even. He was deeply asleep, induced by a small tranquilizer needle that had stung the back of his neck.

In front of him were a group of six people. The first was a relatively tall and quite frankly cute Asiatic young woman with mid-neck shiny black hair set in a pageboy cut. She was an expert in karate, having won a few championships, and was the currently sleeping man's daughter, Xu Mouri.

The second, with a neatly groomed and pointed silvery mustache and thick eyebrows, would have made a tall figure, smartly dressed in a maroon suit complete with necktie and matching melon hat as he was, had he measured more than a grand total of two feet and eight inches of height. He was inspector Flitwick, from the Magical London Police Department.

The third and the fourth were both clad in police uniforms, but whereas one was a gentle-mannered tall black haired man with a soft and patient smile on his face, the other was a tough-looking dark red haired woman with a devil-may-care attitude. They were detectives Takagi and Satou, or, to their friends, Dario and Elmira. Additionally, quite secretly from themselves, but not anyone else, they loved each other.

The fifth, Professor Agasa, looked quite out of place among the police officers and detectives. An elderly man with a long silvery beard and

glittering blue eyes, he was dressed in a white lab coat. Barely anyone knew, much less called him by his real name of Albus.

No one, that is, except for the sixth and strangest looking person in the group. Clearly female, with rather fluffy neck-length brown hair, a keen and knowledgeable mind and piercing, knowing brown eyes that seemed to have no place on her seven years old face, her name was Ai Haibara. However, very few knew that she was actually the masked personae for the eighteen years old poisonous potion developer in hiding from an international crime syndicate, Hermione Granger.

And behind Gilderoy Mouri was a boy her age – both in appearance and in reality... well, ok. A little younger. The boy, a small... or rather, downright shrimpy first grader with messy black hair, a mysterious lightning-bolt-shaped scar on his forehead and piercing, intelligent green eyes much like those of the little girl, had taken the name of Conan Edogawa in a panic rush soon after having been 'shrunk'. His real name, well hidden from everyone except for a very restricted number of people – including one very annoying boy from Hogsmeade, Draco Hattori, also known as the great detective of the north – was Harry Potter, the great detective of the south...

...who was currently speaking into a snake-shaped silver amulet hanging from his neck. Strangely enough, the sounds that came out were not in the high pitched tones of a child, but in a low, suave voice that apparently belonged to detective Mouri.

"The bloody knife coated with acid in his back, shotgun shells in his head, throwing darts in his neck and eyeballs, Neutron bomb residues in his mouth and the pokémon tapes in the VCR were there only as decoys, to make us look away from the true weapon the murderer used to kill the victim." He was saying.

All eyes, except for the sleeping detective's, went to the large, fallen, bloodied and mutilated mass of the victim, Rubeus Hagrid.

"Then what was the weapon?" Inspector Flitwick squeaked, trying to look important while standing on top of a convenient soap box. For reasons best left unexplained for their sheer obviousness, he failed miserably.

"It was a toothpick." 'Mouri' declared, drawing shocked gasps from his captivated audience. Harry grinned; he had all their attention now. "Using a clever stratagem that used the fact that Hagrid was a very large man and that his old table was full of splinters," Conan moved the detective's arm so the hand vaguely pointed at the table that was still covered by that nice and homey-looking real cactus tablecloth, "the murderer injected a deadly poison through his fingers when the victim stung himself on it."

"But how did the murderer know Hagrid would prick himself?" Agasa asked.

"The venom was a Norwegian Ridgeback's. It's Hagrid." Ai explained.

"Oh." Everyone nodded in acceptance. Harry nodded his thanks at Hermione, who nodded back.

"But if what you're saying is true, then the murderer is the last person who visited Hagrid before the tooth fairy discovered the body..." Dario Takagi deduced, "which means that it's—"

"Minerva McGonagall, hands up and no funny business!" Elmira Satou barked, her wand seeming to appear in her left hand.

The elderly woman gave a hard glare at the police officer.

"Sorry professor!" she squeaked and hid behind her hus—boyf—colleague.

The other detective sighed and rubbed his temples with an amused smile.

"Exactly." Harry, still with Gilderoy Mouri's voice, declared. "The murderer is you, Professor McGonagall! And the reason why was... that he broke your favorite teacup when he visited your office last week."

Everyone gasped in surprise, except for McGonagall, Agasa and Ai.

"Within one week, you were able to appropriate everything you needed, most of which can probably still be found in your office."

Behind a display glass. In everyone's view. Right under the 'I killed Hagrid' flashing neon sign. After all, if you were found, you were sure to lose your job, end up working at minimum wages as a grumpy cashier at McDonald's or dress up as Barney at children's birthdays until you died from an OD, and quite possibly cost Gryffindor the house cup. You could not risk it."

"But what did she need?" Professor Albus Agasa asked, though his voice and that glint in his eyes gave Conan the impression he knew already.

"A toothpick, a dragon – I believe he was quite glad when I opened his cage and set him loose in the greenhouses – the decoy weapons, a containment chamber for the Pokémon tapes, seven matching sets of matches, the brain cell of a hopeless wannabe trilingual Anime Otaku, a yellow, pink and purple colored flashlight and a bunch of stickers of the Random Black Cat."

McGonagall shrugged. "I love that cat. He's my idol. And the flashlight was so I could find the brain cell. Took me most of the week, actually."

"So, then. You admit it!" Harry was grinning. He knew it. Justice prevailed once more.

"Of course I do... I'm actually quite proud of how well it worked. I had to use great wile and cunning to make sure Hagrid did not notice the toothpick..."

Flashback:

"Eh? Minerva? What's that thing in yer hand?"

"Oh? That's a poisoned toothpick I intend to kill you with. Your hand, please?"

"Ah... 'ere... Ow!"

End Flashback

"There's no way you can escape," Takagi said calmly, stepping in front of the door. "You'd better give up quietly."

"Or you can try resisting and see the consequences," Satou said with a grin, waving her wand. "Please?"

"Miss Zabini, stop this nonsense." McGonagall snapped. "And just what in the world is this—"

"Expelliarmus!" Seven voices shouted at the same time as everyone except Mouri launched the disarming spell at McGonagall, who was sent flying against the wall, dislodging some dust, a bunch of scantily clad fairies – "Come on, Phil! Hurry up!" – an eight-legged rabbit-like thing and an eight foot long black-armored Alien from the rafter overhead. After giving everyone a look with its non-existent eyes, the acid-blooded monster strutted out of the door, quite calmly, the spider-bunny on its clawed heels.

"The hell did *those* thing come from?!" Detective Satou asked, staring blankly.

Hermione shrugged. "It's Hagrid's house."

"Oh, right."

Inspector Flitwick grunted, trying to pull the much larger Professor McGonagall by her sleeve – and failing miserably.

"Mnhn..." Gilderoy groaned as he stirred. Harry quickly ducked away from behind the man, subtly sliding to stand beside the other neo-first grader, who gave him an amused smile. "What happened?"

"You were bril--... bral..." Xu faltered.

"Brain dead?" Conan suggested in a whisper.

"Brilliant?" Haibara suggested, sniggering.

"Broil ant, dad!" Xu Mouri cheered. Hermione-in-disguise growled and slapped her forehead in frustration. "You catch criminal again!"

"I did?" Gilderoy blinked in confusion, then grinned victoriously. "Oh, of course I did! I *am* a genius after all."

Nobody could explain the sudden bout of coughing that instantly took them all by surprise.

"Still pretending to fall asleep, eh?" Inspector Flitwick said while trying to clamp a pair of handcuffs that were meant for someone his size on McGonagall's much larger wrist. "I still don't know why you do that..."

The blonde private detective grinned and stood. "Have to keep up with the act, after all. Most don't realize my genius until it's too late, and that's the way I like it."

'Right.' Harry Potter/Conan Edogawa thought with a mental smirk.

Pulling out a pen and paper, Mouri looked seductively at Satou. "Autograph?"

"Eat dung." Elmira replied flatly.

"But one thing I don't know, Gilderoy... how did you figure out what the weapon was?" Flitwick asked while trying to tie up a foot long rope around the unconscious professor.

The man blinked. "Weapon? What weapon? The tapes?"

"No, the toothpick full of extremely dangerous and toxic venom!" Flitwick said, adjusting the resonation gems for the stasis field he was about to install around McGonagall.

"What toothpick... oh, you mean that one? Ow! I just pricked myself..." He blinked. "Oooh... it's... the world... getting fuzzy... I think I'm dying..." And he fell on the floor in a dead faint.

A passing eight years old boy with a blue wool hat gasped, "Oh my god, they killed Mouri!"

"Those bastards!" Xu exclaimed, suddenly gaining a green flap-hat.

And suddenly, apparently without prompting, everyone burst out in laughs, even the mutilated Hagrid and the sealed and demon warded McGonagall...

<Ye sure can make interestin' dreams, kiddo...>

.

...and Harry Potter woke up in a start in number six, privet drive, covered in cold sweat.

"What the..." wiping his sweat-drenched brow with his bandanna. "That's it, I swear I will never eat Mrs. Zabini's late night snacks again... Ugh, need a shower."

.

It was a much calmer and cleaner pajama-clad Harry Potter that walked back into the guest room of the Zabini home. He had not dared change it at all, though he knew none of his hosts would mind if he did a little decorating. If anything, Harry was a simple boy and thus the only thing adorning his room was his open trunk, the bed and the small desk on which Hedwig's empty cage stood, beside a handful of open letters from his friends.

It had been quite a surprise; unused as he was of acknowledging his birthday and waiting for presents, he had completely forgotten to give a message to Hermione, Ron and Ginny telling them where they were going. Thus, his friends' presents had waited for him, along with three irate owls, on the windowsill of his room. The three owls, Hedwig, Athena and Errol, had left the packages and letters on the desk, made sure he got them and quickly left.

Hedwig was still giving him the cold shoul—wingblade. As for Athena, she had gone even colder – Harry had spent a few minutes checking for ice on the floor, the other day – and had apparently scolded Mrs. Zabini as soon as she found her. Errol, the Weasley family owl, had simply seemed relieved of being allowed to leave and rest his old hollow bones with his masters.

Unfortunately for him, Ginny's letter had showed Harry that the poor old owl had a long way to go. It had been a simple letter with a newspaper clip tied to it.

The clip had contained a picture of all the Weasleys, smiling and waving at the camera. Harry had barely remembered the extremely freckled face of Charlie Weasley, the dragon rider whom he had briefly met in his first year. There had been another Weasley, clearly adult and even taller than Charlie, holding both twins in a playful headlock. He wore his hair in a long ponytail and had a fang-earring piercing his left earlobe. Harry guessed that one was Bill Weasley, the Gringotts curse-breaker. Ron had been having his hair messed by his mischievously winking little sister and had carried his rat, Scabbers, on his shoulder.

The attached article read this:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

.

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, 'We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank.'

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children attend.

.

Harry had smiled. Although he had a passably neutral relationship with most of the Weasleys, he couldn't help but think that if anyone deserved such luck, it was them. Or the Zabini's, but then he was biased. Now if only they had thought of saving it instead of flaming most of it in a trip to Egypt, but then, who was he to tell them how to spend their money?

...filthy rich, but that wasn't the point.

.

Dear Harry,

.

If you haven't read the article yet, do it now.

Read it yet? Good.

Mum and dad decided that it was about time to visit my oldest brother Bill, in Egypt – mum disapproving of his latest girlfriend might be the cause, but none of my brothers connected the dots yet. We'll still have enough for them to buy us our necessary supplies, and get Ron a new wand – his old one finally keeled over, too much of the core has degraded, at least that's what dad guessed. Mine still works, thankfully.

EGYPT JUST IS AMAZING! Bill spent all evening telling us all those scary stories of people who stumbled on curses left behind by ancient wizards in the pyramids. Mum didn't want me to visit them, but Ron and the twins managed to change her mind. There wasn't all that much danger in it, but that two-headed mummy was creepy. Fred and George almost managed to lock up Percy in a pyramid. If only I had been a few inches taller, mum wouldn't have seen them over my shoulder...

Oh, and Bill wants to thank you for saving me. (he made me write that as soon as he learned I was writing to you)

Harry had easily been able to picture a red-faced Ginny writing the words while her older brother looked over her shoulder with a mischievous grin, then add the brackets as soon as he looked away.

I guess I haven't really thanked you either, have I... My thanks are in your present. Ron sent you a sneakoscope – he bought it and hinted it was yours, but I think he didn't know how to send it to you – or how not to sound too friendly to you in the process. It's a little thing that rings as soon as someone with bad intentions comes near you. Trust

me, it works. It rang every time I was around Fred and George. That's how accurate it is. Then again, it rang all the time, but I guess it might have been my fault.

A winked face had been drawn here. Harry had snorted.

Percy's been in a right mood though. Nothing against me, it looks like he decided that what he said about me last year didn't happen. I'm satisfied with that... for now. His girlfriend sent him a letter two days ago telling him she's head girl, and that some Hufflepuff guy became head boy. Not him. Fred and George didn't help – they congratulated him for a job well done. A hint for when you see him, don't mention the words head or boy, and even less 'proud legacy of troublemakers'. I honestly don't know where those two pulled that out from; Percy is about as much of a troublemaker as a rock under six feet of sand.

...Oh, I forgot about my present, did I... well, I thought about it for some time and hesitated about sending what I decided on, but then I remembered you're spending the summer in Blaise's home, and with what I remember of her mother, (It's kinda hard to forget her anyway) I don't think she'll mind... Fred and George invented them, actually. They wanted to trade it to me in exchange for some of Xu's Instant Jusenkryo Powder but I shudder to think of what they might have done with that, so I refused. They handed it to me pretty fast after I threatened to get Mum and tell her about their inventions.

.

The package had been a box – appropriately marked with a radiation hazard sign – full of something the twins had suitably named 'Fake wands'; essentially, they were wands that *looked* real, until you tried to use them, upon when they would transform into... something. They had apparently not quite managed to make them transfigure into proper objects yet. The closest thing that Harry got to something he knew was one of the Dark Magic Lexicon's 'rats', which wasn't saying much seeing as they looked like gooey... stuff.

The letter had ended with a chaste *Have a nice Summer, Your friend Ginny* that Harry *knew* she had taken more than one try to decide on.

Ron had not sent a letter, but the sneakoscope Ginny had sent from him (which had laid still and silent from the moment had had opened it) that was now lying on his desk spoke volumes.

The next one had been Hermione's, recognizable at first sight from the neat, orderly writing that covered the page.

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Dear Harry,

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I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you - what if they'd opened it at Customs? - but then Hedwig turned up! I think she wanted to make sure you got your birthday present this year, at least. I bought your present by owl-order; there was an advertisement in the Daily Prophet (I've been getting it delivered, it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world). Ron is going to want to kill me for this, since you're on the Slytherin team and all, but see if I care. There are more important things in this world than Quidditch.

Hermione's present had been a broomcare kit, which was displayed on 'his' desk. Indeed, Ron was going to kill her if he learned.

Talking about Ron, did you see that picture of him and his family a week ago? I bet he's learning loads, I'm really jealous - the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating.

"My-my, six lines and a new paragraph just for Ron?" A voice had said from behind him. Startled, he had dropped it on his blanket and whirled around.

It had been Blaise, who had been reading the letter over his shoulder. She had given him a cheerful grin, got on her knees on the bed, picked up the letter and continued the read it:

"*There's some interesting Local history of witchcraft here, too. I've re-written my whole History of Mag...gic... es..say...* Harry, how long was that thing supposed to be?"

"Six rolls." Harry replied, shaking his head in wonder. "Typical Hermione."

"Oh, feast your ears on this: *I hope it's not too long, it's two rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.*" Her chestnut eyes had turned toward Harry with a terrified glimmer. "*Eight effing rolls of parchment!* That girl *needs* to learn when school's over!"

"It's just the way she is, Blaise." Harry had said with a shrug, picking the letter from his friend's hands.

"Yeah, but—but... c'mon!" Tuning her spluttering voice out, Harry had continued to read:

Ron said he'd be back in Britain by the last week of the holidays, and my parents agreed to let me live with them until school starts – as long as I slept in Ginny's room. I swear, it's not like he can't be trusted... Or maybe it's just because I told them he has five brothers...

Tell Blaise Hi from me; see you both on the Hogwarts Express on September the first!

Love from

Hermione

"...great idea, don't you think so?"

"Uh?" Harry looked up, putting the letter down on the bed.

"*Harry!*" Blaise whined. "Weren't you even *listening*? Oh, never mind. I was just saying that if Ron and Hermione started dating, she'd see there's something else in her life than studying—"

Harry spluttered. "D-Da...Blaise, what the..."

"Oh, don't look at me like I've grown a second head. It's a great Idea! She'd lay off studying and learn to have some fun and her attitude would rub off on him, so they'd both be a lot happier..."

'Don't you mean *you'd* be happier about *both* of them?' The thought fleetingly crossed through Harry's brain. A Hermione who didn't study and a Ron who didn't... well, act like *Ron*, seemed like the perfect deal for his friend.

"I'm sure Ginny will agree with me."

Harry had given his friend a weird look before shaking his head dejectedly. He *did* understand *some* girls. This particular one, however, was a complete mystery. He had sworn to himself that he wouldn't get involved in whatever schemes Blaise would think up.

The sad thing was, Ginny hadn't. The next letter from her, which came a week later by a thoroughly exhausted – and towed by Hedwig and Athena – Errol, had been addressed to Blaise, congratulating her on the excellent idea, with a note that she couldn't wait to start planning against them both...

...wording error, pardon this author. I meant *for both their* *sakes*, which was what Blaise and Ginny had both claimed. Far it be for Harry to spy on his friend's mail, the fact that she had read it to him out loud had made ignoring it a bit hard.

■

Sighing at his friend's antics, Harry pushed the memories down to the back of his mind. There was only one week of vacation left, which brought his attention to the final sealed envelope they had received – and that Blaise had handled like toxic waste until Harry had seen what e/se had been in it; their Hogwarts letters and a special form. His had read like this:

■

Dear Mr Potter,
Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross

Station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

Third-years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade at certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed.

*Yours sincerely,
Professor McGonagall*

Deputy Headmistress

.

Had the ceiling been a foot lower – or Blaise a foot taller – it would have sported a nice head-shaped bump after suffering the girl's reaction at being read the letter out loud. Hogsmeade, Harry knew from overhearing older Slytherins' conversations, was the biggest wizard-only community in Britain and happened to be only a few minutes of walk away from the edges of Hogwarts' grounds.

However, a quick check on the current situation had figuratively turned on the shower on Blaise's bonfire. They could no go without the authorization of their guardian – who happened to be Mrs. Zabini. And with Sirius Black on the loose, the chances she'd sign it were about as dim as Crabbe at four in the morning on a slow day.

Mrs. Zabini had spent most of the time since they had gotten back to Privet Drive either firecalling people she knew or brooding pensively at the dinner table with a dark frown on her face. Conversations with her had been short and to the point, and not once did she try to cook for them, something that both relieved and worried Harry.

As for Mr. Zabini, most of his time was spent at work, or talking to his wife in hushed whispers that neither child felt interested in eavesdropping to. Harry had asked him to sign the authorization, but the lawyer had refused.

"I'm not sure if the wizarding world's laws will accept *me* as your guardian, considering your mother is here, Blaise. Besides, I'm not sure she'd let you, and I'm not about to sign it behind her back." He had said after they had asked him to. .

With only one week left, it looked like there was only one thing to do. With a resigned sigh, Harry picked up the letter and the form from his desk and climbed down the stairs to try the *one* thing they hadn't yet... asking her directly.

.

The stairs seemed both interminably long and much too short. The main hallway, though the sun was shining brightly outside, was covered in shadows, possibly since it had no windows and every door accessing it were closed, which was quite unusual.

He first checked the joined dining/living room on the left, but it was empty. The door to the basement was locked and so was the apothecary. Going back upstairs, he was about to check the Zabinis' bedroom when he heard a sound seeping through the door. It sounded like...

...weeping?

Curious, Harry quietly turned the silent doorknob and opened the door, just enough to allow him to peek through.

As politeness obliged, he had never really looked inside Mr. and Mrs. Zabini's room. The occasional glimpse had shown a relatively large room, for a bedroom, with a definitely green palette. Touching the right wall, a double-bed was covered with either very messy or very clean green blankets, depending on if Mr. Zabini had been the first or last to wake up. While both Harry's and Blaise's rooms had windows giving to the back yard, the Zabinis' was located a little over the front door and was usually open.

Blocking all light from entering the room, the dark green curtains blocked said window, making Harry a little nervous that the pale light from the hallway would betray him. He needn't bother.

The two adults were sitting on the bed, the man holding the woman in his arms as she sobbed. Harry almost let a surprised gasp escape. Was she *that* scared for them? Was she *that* certain that Sirius Black would try to finish the job and kill the last Potter?

...did he have the right to break in and ask to voluntarily put himself in danger?

His mind made, Harry silently closed the door, climbed down the stairs with both his and Blaise's authorization and put them on the table for her to look at it later. Whether she refused it or not, Harry couldn't seem to make himself care anymore.

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...and the next morning, they were both signed, with a handwritten note asking them to tell her whenever they were going to Hogsmeade. The pot of floo powder was open near the chimney and she was nowhere to be found.

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Chapter 5: Memories

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In the peaceful small street of Privet Drive, on which twin rows of nearly identical houses rose on each side, was a very unusual home. Not only for the fact that the most disused-looking house of the street was its immediate neighbor – and isolated from it by various wards and a large and ugly sick-looking hedge covering a white picket-fence – not only because it held, in its living room, a pair of brooms displayed like one would a game head, not only for the sheer attitude of the lady of the house, but also because the two thirteen years old friends – a boy and a girl, to boot – were all alone, the father being at work while the mother having mysteriously vanished – through the chimney – once more. At the moment, both teenagers in the throes of puberty were in the girl's bedroom...

...doing homework.

What were you thinking? Never mind.

Or at least *Blaise* was doing her homework. Harry had already done his – or most of it, he hadn't felt up to writing that History of magic essay – how Hermione had survived writing eight rolls of it escaped him – and hadn't been able to see Orion in the constantly misty near-London skies of Surrey.

Therefore, here he was, on the last day of the summer holidays, propped up on his elbows on Blaise's bed, his feet hammering the girl's pillows rhythmically while his eyes and mind tried to take in the twenty-seventh goblin act, which was in almost every way identical to the twenty-sixth, except for the rule regulating whether or not there would be a period at the end of the Gringotts motto (written in Gobbledegook, the Goblin's language, so nobody understood or cared) inscribed on sickles.

"What's the wand movement for the cheering charm again?" Blaise asked. Although he had nearly finished – and what he had left would either never be completed or couldn't be done properly without library

references – she had burst into his room, having apparently discovered that there wasn't a shadow month between August and September, and that she had three days to complete it all.

'course, she'd probably end up getting Hermione to do half of it for her once they got to Hogwarts. But while Blaise, as Hermione's best girl friend, could rely on her help and considerable knowledge, neither Harry nor Draco or Ron could claim the same.

...Draco's pride wouldn't let him ask her if his life depended on it and Ron would try but would invariably get chewed up. As for Harry, he preferred staying on her good side and ask as little as he could, since it would probably come more useful later.

"Hm... Flick up left, flick up right, flip 180 counter clockwise from the right, big clockwise twirl from the top and point at the target." Harry replied, bored.

The girl shot him an awed look; that was a lot of movements to know by heart. "How did you remember that?!"

"It makes a smiley face, that's how." He explained, twirling the movements in mid-air with his index.

The girl repeated the movements in curiosity before shrugging. "It's not like I'll really need *that* charm, anyway." She snorted. "I can see it now: 'hey, mister dark wizard! Suffer my cheering charm! Smile while you're aiming that killing curse at me!' Great plan."

Harry smiled while his hand poked the blunt end of his pen on his chin. The piece of parchment in front of him was as empty as the Weasley's Gringotts vault – whoops, not anymore, that's right... - and the text in front of him had yet to step one timid foot into his brain.

With a frustrated growl, Harry stuffed the blank parchment in the book like a makeshift page keeper and then shut the heavy volume violently. Sounds like he wasn't going to be getting any work done for now. He rolled off his friend's bed, got up and stretched his aching muscles while Blaise shot him a dark look from her desk.

"You're giving up?"

"For now," he replied with a nod.

"Ssslacker." Nemesis hissed, lazily coiled in the sunbeam that crossed the floor in front of the window as he was.

"Look who's talking," Harry shot back before walking out.

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Without Blaise's parents, the house was amazingly dull. The rooms, while not Spartan, were mostly functional and didn't bear all that many decorations or distractions. Passing down the stairs, Harry gave a quick look at the pictures hung on the wall. Most of them were of all three together, or at least of Mrs. Zabini and Blaise, and none of them moved at all. He supposed that, for a half-blood family, such a deal was more useful...

...hm... did the family of the Muggle have the right to know about Magic?

...did Mr. Zabini even *have* family?

Chuckling to himself, Harry shook his head. Bah, there he went again, nosing about on things that weren't any of his business.

Passing in front of the kitchen door, which was separate from the combined dining and living room, he paused momentarily. He hadn't eaten a thing since this morning, and Mrs. Zabini's gastronomic food – read: instant noodles with soy sauce in bags – did not make for a satisfying breakfast.

...for a reason he ignored, the image of a penguin falling over in a dead faint from food poisoning came to his mind.

He pulled out enough to make a sandwich from the fridge and put it on the counter, trying hard not to look out the window at the ugly hedge separating his current 'home' from his old one. Strange how about five meters changed things... if he had tried to make himself a sandwich while under the Dursleys' care, he would without fail have Dudley popping up and stealing it. Here, though, he could do what he wanted...

A look behind him made him correct that statement. He could do what he wanted, except going through the constantly locked basement door, set under the stairs and visible through the kitchen doorway. The only time he had gone down had been an exception; the everyday charms – a special ward that made a Muggle who, say, peered in the window, think he's seeing nothing unusual – had not been installed, and therefore Athena hadn't been able to come up.

However, he hadn't seen anything strange down there, even though he had been rather green with magic back then; it had been full of both filled and empty boxes – which made sense since they had just moved in – but had nothing that required a locked door.

So then, why?

'Maybe there's nothing,' Harry mused while upturning one slice of bread on the other, 'or maybe there's something they don't want us to see...' He paused in mid-bite, giving a look at the door. 'It's just a basement... there's probably nothing... but then again, what does it hurt to take a look...'

As I mentioned before, one of Harry's greatest faults is his curiosity.

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'The door is probably locked.' He told himself after having eaten. In a few strides, he reached for the door handle...

CL-CLICK

...that, after an instant of resistance, gave and turned, allowing the door to open in a barely audible creak to reveal a wooden flight of stairs and a dust-filled room. The basement, lit up through a pair of small windows set at floor-level, was smaller than he remembered, though he doubted any magic other than life's miracle of growth was to blame. There were noticeably less boxes and many more shelves that seemed to have sprouted out – possibly from the aforementioned boxes, or perhaps were they the boxes themselves? Floating about the room was the faint odor of moss and utter silence, except for the light singing of birds seeping through the open window – it had only been opened recently, if the smell was any indication.

Guided by his curiosity, Harry carefully stepped down each of the stairs, wincing at every protest of the planks, as if fearing Mrs. Zabini would suddenly pop out of the fire and put him in the frying pan. The basement's floor was made of bare concrete, but it felt surprisingly warm; more magic at work, probably.

The shelves, not made of nailed or screwed planks but instead single large blocks of carved and polished wood – or most likely transfigured – were filled with bottles of spices and potion ingredients; side-by-side, two bottles were respectively marked with parsley and porcupine quills. Some of the boxes were still sealed with transparent tape, but others were open; 'Shadow of a Doubt' by William Coughlin met 'Hextraordinary Jinxes, Respelled Edition' by Marie Withridge.

He noticed one of them, a conventional square cardboard box set down on a locked black chest, had no tape sealing it, but still had its top closed. Curious, he opened it.

The first thing he saw inside was an adult-sized partially burned crimson-colored battle robe that gave the impression of having been unceremoniously dumped in the box. More delicately set underneath was a bunch of Auror manuals – similar to the one Blaise had received over by owl post the previous year, perhaps it had been pulled out of this box – and...

A bunch of partially burned wooden shards in a plastic bag. Broom shards? Wand shards?

Pushing the discovery aside, he dug deeper, finding a golden medal bearing the inscription of 'Campionato annuale di duello de Roma, divisione dei bambini, #1 posto' in very small lettering, before he decided to push the manuals aside and find...

"What the..."

There, at the bottom of the box, was a small stone basin, filled with... something. He couldn't really tell if it was liquid or gaseous, nor could he tell what it would feel like to the touch, but it was silver. And glowing. And moving on its own accord, as if an unfelt wind agitated the small pond. Or perhaps *like* wind. Sealing the top to prevent leaks – or to prevent someone from touching it – was a piece of saran wrap.

Curious, Harry pulled it out of the cardboard box and put it down on the floor. With one sweep of his hand, he pulled the wrapping off the top and held his breath – potions class had taught him *that* bit of caution around unknown substances. However, when he saw that there didn't seem to be anything coming out, he exhaled loudly – then cursed himself for being loud, and cursing himself again for being a coward.

Examining the basin further, Harry didn't seem to be able to find anything else about it; the symbols or runes carved around its surface were all unknown to him and he just couldn't tell what the... stuff, was. It looked interesting, though, almost like liquid wind... it *did* kind-of look like multiple strands of hair, though, but last time he had checked hair was not silver – well, Professor Dumbledore was getting close... – and did not glow – even on him.

Wondering what kind of feeling it had, Harry reached forward to touch the liquid...

...then immediately pulled back. Idiot! First rule in potions and magic in general; don't touch it if you don't know what it is! Whipping his wand out of his wrist-mounted sheath, he tried again, this time aiming to put the tip of his wand in it, ready to pull it back at the first signs of smoke.

However, there was none. That did not mean there was not a reaction, however. As soon as the wood touched the... stuff, it began to move in a lazy circle around the volume of the basin, emptying the middle like a cyclone to reveal an 'eye' of black.

No, wait. That wasn't true. It wasn't *all* black... there were a few, barely visible shapes moving...

Pulling himself closer to the strange liquid, Harry tried to see them, but they were just too small...

...and his nose touched the surface.

.

Immediately, he felt himself falling through the surface and down into the blackness of the basin. Strangely enough, the feeling made him think of that time he had fallen in Tom Riddle's diary, not that long ago. Reflexively, he closed his eyes and held his breath, even if, strangely enough, he didn't feel wet at all...he *had* fallen in something liquid, right? Or maybe it had just *looked* liquid? With magic, there was simply no way to—

His feet touched something with the softness of a cushion, cutting his rambling thoughts short. Exhaling the breath he had been holding, he opened his eyes...

...and stared.

Instead of the naked wooden ceiling, painted concrete walls and raw, dust-carpeted concrete floor of number six privet drive's basement, he found himself looking at familiar-looking stone walls, a tiled floor of a very familiar shape and a brightly burning fireplace surrounded by a bunch of large green couches he knew personally, having spent much time sitting on them himself.

The Slytherin common room. He was in Hogwarts, then. The people around him, however, were anything but familiar, and there seemed to be a tense atmosphere that made him think of the previous year, soon after Blaise had been attacked. Only this time nobody was looking at him.

A second look made him rephrase that; *absolutely* nobody was looking at him, as if he didn't exist. And if the feeling he'd had when he fell down 'here', wherever that was, was what he thought it was, then he *didn't* exist. For them, anyway; he found himself in a memory for the second time in six months.

Gathering his wits, he assessed the situation. He had found the... thing in the Zabini's basement. Therefore, it belonged to one of them. A very simple deduction later, he felt a pang of guilt; Mrs. Zabini would probably *really* not like it if she knew he was here. He'd better find a way out...

The scene shifted on its own, startling Harry. Was this some kind of magical recording device? A recording of memories? Of Mrs. Zabini's memories?

'Ok, first priority, getting *out of here before she comes back!*' He thought frantically, looking around as the scene reformed itself.

This time, he wasn't at Hogwarts. Though the room had tall stone walls like the castle's great hall, the school did not have, to his knowledge, tallmulticolored stained glass windows depicting the crucifixion and rebirth of the Christ, nor did it had rows of wooden benches aligned all over the room, or a priest standing in front with a white-dress and tuxedo-clad couple.

This was obviously a church. And if the woman's garb was proof of anything, this was also a wedding ceremony. Though he couldn't see the bride's features through the large white dress, he felt a pang of instant recognition upon seeing the groom's hair, but he couldn't put his finger on where he had--

"It's beautiful, eh?" A female voice said.

Startled, Harry whirled around. Did someone see him? *Could* someone see him?

However, he saw he was wrong as soon as he spotted the source of the voice. Sitting a row behind him, three teenage girls shared a bench. The first and farthest one had long, flowing mid-back length black hair, shocking almost golden eyes, a pale complexion and eastern European facial features and was holding a pointy witch's hat with an oversized brim on her lap.

The one closest to him had shoulder-length dark red hair and a childish grin; she had been the one to speak, apparently. Her members were all elongated and a bit knobby and her chest was relatively absent, revealing that she was still in the roughest parts of puberty. Harry almost didn't recognize her, until he noticed the *very* familiar playful glint in those dark, forest green eyes...

Mrs. Zabini?!

Finally, the one in the middle, and apparently the one the young Elmira Zabini had spoken to, gave a disdainful look at the couple in front with almost feline blue eyes. While the first girl's eyes were what remained ingrained in Harry's thoughts, what first struck him as soon as he saw her was a yellowish-orange V-shaped marking that went from the top of her forehead to the top of her nose and her long and unnaturally wild *blue* hair. Not indigo or hints of blue, but a brilliant, uniform and proud sky blue tint.

'Has to cost a fortune in hair coloring...' he mused.

"Pfeh," the girl spat, stretching with feline grace and laziness, opening her mouth spectacularly wide in the process, "'f I had my way, I'd've stayed'at Hogwarts." She replied with an unidentifiably accented drawl. "Bad 'nough she wanted 'ta have a damned *Church* weddin'... An' a Muggle one, 'too. 'Behave yourself', she says. Peh."

Mrs. Zabini chuckled and gave a look at the other girl, who grew a little pinker for some reason. With an impish grin, the younger future-immature adult turned back to the couple in front and the priest...

"You may kiss the bride."

...who had apparently just finished, as the man scooped the woman in his arms spectacularly and giving her a passionate kiss, cutting her startled shriek short and hiding both their faces from his view.

Strange, he just *knew* that man's hair...

"Ya go, 'gal!" The blue-haired wildcat shouted, jumping up to put a foot on top of the bench – never mind about the mousey-looking man sitting in front, who shot her a dirty look. The pale girl shyly tugged at her friend's sleeve, but all she managed to do was end up pulled up into a stand herself, her alabaster cheeks taking on a light pink blush of embarrassment while she dropped her oversized hat on the floor.

And the scene shifted again...

...into complete pandemonium. Everywhere, colors whirled into an indiscernible mess. Sounds, voices, noises mixed into an auditory

mayhem, with only few words or sounds coming out clear enough to be understood or recognized.

A tint of glasses.

"Me? Marriage!? Why should I chain myself down to just one girl, it would be downright *criminal*!"

"Yes, the poor girl probably wouldn't survive the week, having to handle being around you all the time, Bl—"

A car's horn.

"—pin, für gott's sake, vill you ever shut der hell up?! Du dreibeinig hirntot Vulf!"

Laughter.

Cheers.

"Wizardin' superiority? Peh, they ain't invented anythin' like a television set yet—"

A gunshot.

"Um? Nein, danke..."

Voices.

"Alright. Who spiked the punch on my wedd—never mind, I know who."

More glass tinting.

"We wish ya a happy fuck-night, we wish ya a happy fuck-night—"

"LUCIA!"

Slow footsteps.

Long, ear-breaking ringing.

A loud, barking engine. A motorcycle?

Screeching wheels.

A growl. An animal?

"No... ..stop..."

Something breaking. Glass. Wood.

A loud ripping. Cloth?

Childish, innocent laughter.

A loud thump.

"I vill make you regret this..."

A loud howl.

A horror movie scream...

.

And as quickly as the mess had appeared, it vanished. Harry barely had time to clear his eyes and try to get his bearings back – he was fairly sure he did *not* have three left arms – that the mists parted and he found himself in another scene.

The walls and the night-blackened view of the gothic grid-blocked windows told him all he needed to know about his new location; Hogwarts or, more precisely, one of the dorms room. Not his, though. However, unless things had been decidedly different in the seventies, the large poster of a nearly-naked 'babe' hanging over one of the beds told him this was the boys' side, never mind of who was in it.

Because there were girls here.

Three of them, and he easily recognized them; they were the very same three as in the church, only a few years older. This time, the blue haired one was wearing what at first glance looked like the

Hogwarts uniform, apparently cut to reveal her midriff and shortened into a lower thigh-length skirt, held in place by a flimsy-looking belt.

Mrs. Zabini had grown, as well; no longer was she the almost toothpicky girl from the church, but she was far from being the curvy and wild beauty she was today. The Hogwarts robes clashed horribly with her hair, though; it was dark enough to make Harry lose exactly where they separated in the darkness of the night, giving it the look of a weird skin-tight yet baggy hood; a proof that Blaise's slightly lighter tint made a huge difference.

With them were four boys, also clad in Hogwarts uniforms and bearing the crest of Slytherin. None of them looked even slightly familiar, so Harry barely gave them a glance. One of them was speaking, though, in a low and ghastly voice of someone telling a ghost story, his face partially lit by the wand glowing under his chin, throwing what he apparently hoped were spooky shadows but were about as scary as the shadow of a roll of toilet paper.

"And then, when he woke up..." the boy continued slowly, drawing out the last word, "he had *fangs as well!*"

The story's climax left the room cold, though. The blue-haired girl gave the boy a withering glance. "That *had* 'ta be tha worst Vamp' story I've evar heard."

The other three boys chuckled at the fourth's discomfiture.

"I *do* have others, but *some of us* might get offended by the ending." The boy defended himself.

"Tha's what they all say." The girl snickered.

"Fine, *you* tell a story then, if you're so clever!" He growled. "Go on, since you're *so much* better than me."

The girl grinned and, in the darkness and the pale light of the boy's wand, he could have *sworn* there was a fang there, purred: "Jus' ya remember, Black... ya asked fer it..."

He perked up. *Black?! Hadn't Mrs. Zabini said she had been two years younger?*

"Nothing inappropriate, Ivy." Elmira warned.

The girl gave a playful glance at Blaise's future mother, throwing an arm around the pale girl's shoulders. "'depends on what ya call 'inappropriate'... we're all adults here... well, most 'a us, anyway."

Elmira growled. With a playful shrug, 'Ivy' let go of the black-haired girl – whose cheeks had pinked up a bit, possibly in embarrassment – and rested her weight on her arms in a move obviously meant to bounce her generous cleavage for maximum effect.

"Fine, no manhood eatin' briefs story fer tonight, then..." Her grin widened at the unconscious leg-closing of four members of the room, while the noticeably smaller black-haired girl shot her a disapproving glance. Elmira sighed and slapped her forehead in apparent exasperation. "What d'yall think of a scary story in a Harem?"

"Liebe!" The pale girl scolded, while the four boys grinned and nodded. The name, or at least nickname, was not in English, if the foreign-sounding syllables were any indication.

"Five 'ta two, vetoed!" The girl crowed, to her friends' frustration. "Ok, it's da story of an extremely beautiful gal—" the girl cut herself off, her grin freezing in place, her hand tightly clenching around the pale girl's.

"Ivy? Is something wrong?" Elmira asked worriedly, walking on her knees, closer to the blue-haired girl.

The girl's lips moved in a faint whisper, but in the utter silence of the room Harry managed to hear the word: "James?"

Then, the yellowish-orange symbol on her face lit up and her face contorted in agony... a sudden blur of black ramming against Elmira and pushing her down... a terrified scream and many shouts...

...a deafening explosion...

...white...

.

Harry barely noticed the next few scenes; the images were blurry and contorted, as if he was looking at the world through the wrong pair of glasses. Shadowy shapes surrounded him, forgotten dreams or pain-filled delusions, he didn't know, couldn't tell...

Finally, it stabilized enough for him to recognize where he was, and it was with a groan that he did. The infirmary. Wonderful. However, it was still a bit blurry; as far as he knew – and he knew it, boy did he know it – the room was rectangular and didn't waver around like this one did.

Faint voices came to his ears, but, just like the rest of the scene, they were distant, as if they were only remembered.

"—oor girl...-arely survived.....onic energ... ...omplicating my charmwo... ...ppened, ...lastor?"

Though he could barely make out the sounds, he recognized the voice as belonging to Poppy Pomfrey, the school nurse.

"...losion, but ... don't kn... -hy. She's the only one still alive."

The last few words, said by a rather gruff voice he didn't know, were startlingly crystal clear, as if they had cut deeply through the woman's mind and remained perfectly ingrained in her memory.

"...y god... ...obody left?

"...ell, they still haven't found ...cKin...ey's bo...miss Noire is understandably h... .."

"...es, ...erstan.....ire..."

.

His vision faded to black and Harry felt sick. How much longer was this going to last? He was beginning to regret opening that door and

finding this place... was he going to be stuck in here forever, constantly reviewing Mrs. Zabini's memories?

...how pissed off would she be?

He decided that not thinking about it was the best course of action. Panicking wouldn't help. To his surprise and dismay, he found it still wasn't over. The next scene was in a relatively large room walled with jagged dark stones that looked more like masses of black knives than walls. The floor was cold and made of flat grey stones freckled with something that seemed suspiciously like blood, while the ceiling was both too far and too dark to see. The only sources of light were dimly burning wall-hung candles, barely enough to prevent one from ramming into one of said walls and quite possibly skewering themselves.

And, across the room, about thirty people were doing single-armed push-ups on the floor. Most already had a sickly red tint to their sweat-drenched faces and their arms were shaking from the strain, proving they had been at it for a long time.

He recognized the one closest to him at first glance. The dark red hair was a dead giveaway, even if it was unkempt and knotted. Mrs. Zabini, and she didn't look much different from the one of today...

...except for the eyes, which glittered not in the childish impishness he knew, but in a frightening cold and emotionless determination. Her arm was shaking just as much as the others', but unlike them, her pain didn't register on her face. Strange, he reflected as soon as he saw her: something else was different... *wrong*, somehow...

Scattered among the crowd, a handful of people were standing, all of them clad in black battle robes. Harry saw two of them taunt one of the exercisers, a middle-aged man who looked like he was on the verge of cracking. On the other side of the room, one of the black-robed men roughly shoved his foot on the shoulder blades of another, sending his face crashing against the cold stone ground with a muffled scream and the dull cracking of a breaking nose.

Mrs. Zabini was not exempted. A very scary-looking severely scarred individual with a long mane of dark hair whose face looked like it had

been chiseled out of a block of wood by someone who had a very poor idea of what a person looked like, with one normal, black and glittering eye and the other just as glittery, but obviously artificial, blue, as big as a dime and, above all, moving independently from the other, was standing beside her.

"Feeling the pain yet, Zabini? At least the others have only a couple of hours more to go before they switch to their other arm... you don't have that luxury, you damned weak *cripple*!"

Mrs. Zabini seethed in rage and Harry immediately realized what he had missed with a deep sense of horror...

...The sleeve resting on her back was flat, baggy and *empty*. Mrs. Zabini's left arm was missing, he couldn't tell up to where.

Make it stop... please...

"That hurt, eh?" The man said gruffly, his nostrils spreading as he took a deep, audible and intimidating breath. Bending down over her, the man continued, on a lower tone, "maybe you should just *give up* and spare yourself the futility of going on. They'll never accept someone like *you* here..." His voice sounded familiar, and recent. Odd, he *knew* he would remember someone like *that* if he had seen him.

Mrs. Zabini looked up, right into his mismatched eyes, giving the man the hardest glare Harry had ever seen on her face.

The man's ugly mouth twisted in a dark smirk. "Feeling brave, are you?"

And he shoved his right foot, which Harry noticed was artificial, made of wood and, above all, *clawed*, against her ribs, hitting a good half of her sensitive breasts. With a gargling, wet cough of agony, the woman rolled on her left side, her sole arm going to her flank far below where she had been kicked, exactly where Harry remembered the scar was...

...where a bloodstain was forming against her clothes...

I don't want to see any more...

"Hurts, eh... it's not going to stop, you know. It'll just keep going on and on... unless you pack up like the weakling you are and *leave*..."

Shooting the man another glare through pain-ridden eyes, the woman pulled herself back on her stomach and, with apparently inhuman efforts, forced her trembling arm to push her body up...

Stop... that's enough!

And mercifully, the scene did stop.

.

Harry let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding and shakily drew in another. His stomach felt like it had discovered the sandwich had eaten was poisoned, his heart was beating like a punk-rock drummer and his throat felt both constricted and dry. Frantically looking around, he tried to find a way, *any* way, to get out of here, to not see any more of this...

...he resisted the urge to whimper the scene reformed...

...the very same room... the same cold, jagged walls, the same cold stone floor freckled with even more spilled and dried blood than before...

...but only three people were left in the room, laying on their sides and apparently sleeping on the bare floor, supporting their heads on their arms. Or arm, in Mrs. Zabini's case, Harry reminded himself morbidly. The woman looked, quite simply, like hell. Her eyes were tightly shut and her face set into an angry frown, even in sleep. Her hair was matted and, at some places, burnt. Her clothes had also not escaped damage, ridden with cuts and small droplets of blood; it was obvious she had not had the luxury to change them. Harry didn't know how much time had passed between the two scenes, but based on the condition of the room and its occupants, it had been brutal and long enough.

His observations were cut short when something entered his peripheral vision. He turned to face what it was—

—Mrs. Zabini's arm shot out from under her head, her wand seemed to appear in her hand from the sheath attached to her wrist—

—the blur's – no, the tormentor from the previous scene's – arm raised, a wand plainly visible in it—

"TARENTALLEGRA!"

"PROTEGO!"

Two shouts later, a brilliant beam of silvery magic bounced off a wavy translucent dome-shaped shield. Mrs. Zabini promptly shot to her feet without using her arm, which was pointed in the direction of the blur.

"Not bad, Zabini... but—"

Her eyes widened and flickered to the left...

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!"

"—not good enough!"

The woman twisted her body, barely avoiding the yellow beam of magic that sped past, burning some hair, before harmlessly fizzling out against the far wall. Her wand was immediately pointed toward the source of the spell and, with blurry motions Harry wouldn't have followed had he not known the spell himself, shot a stunner that was barely avoided.

"EXPELLIARMUS!" The first one, now behind her, cast. Already twisted and tangled, she was unable to avoid the spell and was sent flying, her wand landing at the first's feet, her body hitting the floor about six feet behind, at the feet of the other.

To Harry's surprise, she gave a sharp tug with her arm and her wand was suddenly sent in mid-air, flying in her direction—

Only to be intercepted when the other attacker caught it.

"Nice try." He said with a grin, teasingly dangling her wand just out of her reach from the invisible wire tied to its back. His foot roughly pressed on her chest and his wand pointed directly at her right eye. "Crucio."

And she screamed. She screamed like she was being torn apart, like her limbs were on fire, like someone was cutting her legs off with a steak knife...

And she shook, her body trembling under the assault, fighting futilely against the weight holding her down, trying to push away the pain but unable to...

Harry closed his eyes and tried to block out the sounds. The screams seemed only to become louder, though, become unable to ignore, unable to forget...

.

And the scene mercifully shifted to black. The screams didn't stop, though. They kept going, resonating through his brain, tearing through his mind until their source turned hoarse, until he found himself unable to continue, until his throat simply became too hurt to continue... Hugging his knees to his body, he let a tear drip down his cheek.

He wanted to get out. He had seen enough, far enough, far more than he had ever wanted. He wished he had never come down the stairs, never found this *damned* thing... never opened the box... never learned what was behind Mrs. Zabini's past...

.

Hoping against hope that it was over, he risked opening his eyes and found himself looking at a concrete floor. Was it over? Was he *finally* out of the memories? Had he managed to get out somehow?

His hope was crushed into a fine mix of disappointment and despair as he found he was standing on a concrete walkway of downtown Muggle London. The sky was in an unnatural monochrome grey and

there was not a sound to be heard. Looking around, he tried to find Mrs. Zabini, or at least *anyone* he knew, or anything he recognized...

Some distance at his left he spotted a mini-van, the long kind with a pair of doors in the back, parked in a dark backstreet entrance. That wasn't the fact that attracted his attention, but the fact that the water puddle behind it waved almost undetectably with the soft wind, whereas most of the street was frozen; apparently, the puddle was the only thing of it she could see if his memories of wading through memories were good. Reluctantly approaching it, he became aware of hushed voices coming from inside, unnaturally loud in the almost eerie silence of the ghost road.

"How far away?"

"Not very far... less than a hundred feet. I don't think he's alone."

"Who's with him?"

"Macnair. And someone else, but I can't tell who or how many they are."

Harry made it to the van and peered through the doors, which were partially open. The inside was dark, only lit by the pale light filtering through the small, dirty window of the van and the crack between the doors. There was a separation between the driver's compartment and the back, a thick metal barrier that seemed made to withstand strong hits, both magical and physical.

Sitting on a barely visible pair of benches whose cushions seemed to have kicked the bucket long ago, five green-clad Aurors were surrounding a sixth, who had his softly glowing wand pointed to his ear and was seemingly listening vigilantly; he was probably using some kind of listening device. Strange, none of them were Mrs. Zabini; he couldn't see her anywhere. So how could this wind up in her memories?

"Alright." One of them, whose robe bore a small golden star on the left breast, said. From the way the others immediately looked at him, it was obvious he was the leader of this group. "Listen up. Our objective here is the death eaters *surrounding* Malfoy. If Malfoy

escapes, it's not too bad. By the time he notices the bug, we'll have one or two more groups captured.

"The more of them we capture alive, the faster this damn goose chase will be over, but we need to be quick before the Muggles arrive. I stress again, we need them *alive*."

"We know that, cap'tain." Another Auror, a young man who looked like he was barely out of Hogwarts, said.

The leader, temporarily dubbed 'cap'tain', gave a grunting nod. "I meant *her*."

"Oh."

All five faces turned to stare at the front of the van, where Harry's eyes, barely adapting to the darkness, managed to see a blurry shape. Since there was no other room in the van, logic decreed that this blur was Mrs. Zabini. Especially when what he identified as a leg moved into the light to reveal part of a pair of red pants or jeans, he had no way of telling for sure.

"Acknowledged, capture of the targets is the priority." Harry's heart froze at the icy voice. There was no trace of emotions whatsoever in it; she sounded like a machine. "Because of the time restriction, the fastest methods of disablement will be taken." And in a whisper Harry was pretty sure he only heard because he was in her memory, she added, "All who have allied with the dark shall die."

The man's face turned into an expression of disgust. "I still don't understand why they'd want to deploy *you* of all people... But I'm not your boss. Just do your job, Zabini."

And the blur moved into the light. Mrs. Zabini's body, completely clad in a vibrant red long coat that contrasted violently with the Aurors' green, looked almost exactly like it did nowadays; only her hair, now loose on her back, then tied in a tight braid, was different. That is, once again, except for the face.

Whereas the Mrs. Zabini he knew had eyes glittering with mirth and impishness – when she wasn't worried, that it – this one's were cold

and as hard as flint, piercing forward like spears and striking a string of fear in Harry's heart. Her left arm was back, looking no different than a regular arm. With three long strides, heedless of the legs hurryingly scurrying out of her path, she reached the doors and pushed them open. Both her arm and the door passed through Harry's ghostly chest, to his discomfort.

Hm... strange, hadn't he bumped off Tom Riddle, back in the diary?

Whirling around, Harry immediately noticed that the street was suddenly bursting with life. A car cruised on the street, scarce pedestrians strode on the walkways, completely ignoring the van or the dirty backstreet. Overhead, the sky was suddenly alive with sinisterly moving clouds covering a dark grey sky that had nothing to do with the time or the Londonian climate. Even as he watched, he could see small wet spots of rain appear on the pavement, bricks and concrete of the street.

Mrs. Zabini silently strode toward the nearly empty street, her coat waving behind her from the waist, followed by the eyes of five green-clad officers of the magical law.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" He heard one of the Aurors ask.

"I never said that." The leader replied flatly, before he froze and became blurry; Mrs. Zabini had just turned the corner. Without really thinking about it, Harry followed her.

.

He saw her walk with long, even strides on the cold concrete, too fast for him to catch up, but slow enough to allow him to trail at a light jog. A businessman in her path scuttled into the street to avoid her; she didn't even flinch. Her unblinking, cold eyes were riveted toward a large Italian restaurant with a large table-filled veranda in front. More specifically, she was looking at the parking lot, where, among a few parked cars, Harry could faintly see five blurry shapes, about sixty feet away. His concentration was distracted when a drop of rain passed through his head and landed against the walkway. All around him, more water fell at an increasing rate as the storm picked up, the

few thin trees bordering the street waving from the growing strength of the wind.

Her walk stopped at the edge of the lot, allowing Harry to catch up to her. Leaning against a modern overhanging street lamp, her lips twisted into a cold smirk as her eyes stared directly at the five men, whose faces were not quite discernable through the thickening curtain of rain.

"Hey boys, I'll give you a choice." Mrs. Zabini said in an almost teasing manner but with a definitely frightening tone of voice, at least to Harry. "One," she counted on the fingers of her right hand, "you give up quietly and nobody gets hurt except your prides, two, you resist and give me stress relief at your own risk, or three, you kill yourselves now and save everyone the trouble of wasting tax money by housing your sorry hides in Azkaban. What'll it be?"

As a response, the five slipped their hands into their coats, pulling out death eater masks to put on their faces.

"I don't think your realize you're outnumbered here, lady." One of them, whose cold voice sounded familiar, growled.

Five wands slid out of their owners' respective pockets.

"I take it that means number two." The woman noted.

Low, cold chuckles were her answer. Mrs. Zabini shrugged nonchalantly. Harry noticed that her wand was suddenly in her left hand.

"Had to give you the choice, last time I barged in without talking, I got yelled at."

Then, Harry didn't quite know what happened. He barely heard her mumble an incantation that was easily drowned out by five simultaneous castings and gun-like detonations from the other side of the parking lot. Five beams of light converged on Mrs. Zabini's location...

And then, with no warning or running start, she jumped a whole nine feet, straight up in the air, her lithe body curling into a ball of arms, legs and blood red hair. At the apparent apex of her leap, he saw her kick off the lamp post, crashing through the rain all the way to the back of the restaurant's lot before rolling to a stop behind a mini-van. Two spells impacted against its side a second later, leaving a searing red mark on the metal on which falling rain instantly wisped into steam and an elongated molten hole in the windshield. On the street, the few passer-bys who hadn't taken cover from the rain ran away in a screaming panic, one of them shouting about a crossfire.

The five death eaters spread away from each other, one of them taking cover behind another car, another hiding behind the trash container while the other three stayed standing, far from any cover. He didn't have time to question the decision that Mrs. Zabini moved again, this time running on the ground with long, weightless leaps, as if gravity had almost no hold on her. Three spells, launched by those not hiding, simultaneously impacted against the ground near her feet, only managing to lift up a cloud of dust, rubble and steam and hiding her from view, but her path had her heading straight for the trash container.

He missed what had happened next simply because he was on the wrong side of the action, but managed to hear a sharp, meaty crack and a shout of pain, soon followed by the dull metallic thud of a head ramming forcefully against the side of a container.

The trademark whirring and following roar of a starting engine had him whirl around, only to have him block his eyes with his arms as the headlights of a car cut brightly through the darkness of the storm. The second hiding death eater had apparently started up his cover and, based on the way his wand pointed at the dashboard, was remote controlling it.

Turning again, he saw Mrs. Zabini walk out from behind the container, her left fist dripping with drops of fresh blood. A screeching of wheels later, the car was sent right at her. Though he knew she would come out of this fight just fine since she was still alive today, Harry felt a chill of fear cross his spine.

He didn't need to.

"Expulsio!"

The car's nose rose from the strength of the banishing charm while the back wheels continued to push forward, sending the car into a spectacular flip, its metal hull creaking in protest to being stressed in ways it wasn't meant to.

"Expulsio!"

The second banishing charm caused the heavy mass of metal and glass to fly through the air. The back bumper dug into the ground, sending the car into an impressive series of deafeningly loud crashes and tailspins, right back at the stunned death eater who was...

...unable to avoid it. With a short scream that was quickly cut off, the man was crushed under the car's hood. A single arm escaped unharmed, flopping down lifelessly into a growing puddle of water and blood.

"Stupefy!" Mrs. Zabini's voice cut through the constant rushing of the rain. A ray of red flew toward one of the remaining death eaters who, like Harry, had been staring at the car in disbelief. Caught by surprise, the black-clad man was unable to avoid it and fell in a boneless heap against the wet pavement.

This seemed to knock the other two out of their reverie. Both simultaneously decided that staying and fighting someone who had taken down three of their own in less than a minute was foolish and promptly rushed for the doors of the restaurant. Once more launching herself in a dazzlingly fast dash, Mrs. Zabini hurried toward them, but couldn't make it in time to prevent them from getting inside.

Following the scene by walking through the wall, Harry found himself standing in the middle of complete chaos. The dining room, somewhat shaped like a P, still held a handful of people, who had been morbidly looking through the tinted windows of the restaurant. The two masked men's entrance seemed to make everyone realize this wasn't their imagination or a staged performance and promptly sent them in a screaming panic. Unfortunately, the entrance was also

the exit, and the emergency exit passed too close to the death eaters for the scared clients and employees to attempt passing through.

One of the death eaters ran deeper in the restaurant, dashing between the tables and sending a plate of food crashing into the floor. The other hid on the other side of the door from the dining room, away from the windows and prying eyes, yet at grabbing distance.

Wait, how did she remember this, then?

Hm, she must have been guessing.

With enough strength to crack the window panel, Mrs. Zabini burst through the entrance, only to find herself tackled in the back and held in an arm lock by the much larger and heavier death eater.

"You've made a mistake, girly." The man growled angrily over her right shoulder. "See, if you had just attacked us, I would have just killed you. But, since you just killed my friend Nott, I'm going to fucking rape your brains out and make you beg for it before I kill you..."

Harry saw her eyes widen in the first true emotion he had seen from her; fear. Then, her face twisted in a ferocious sneer of rage. Unnoticed by her captor, Mrs. Zabini's left arm *twisted* backwards at a humanly impossible angle to point her palm near his stomach.

"...and who knows, maybe if I like it enough, I'll keep you as my toy—"

SLASH

"—**URK!**" the man gasped, his face contorting in agony. A second later, a few drops of crimson blood came from his mouth in a ragged cough while his arms dropped hers. Then, Mrs. Zabini pulled her arm away, an arm that suddenly held a bloodied sword that had run the man through his midsection. His blood flowing freely from the gaping wound, the man fell to the floor with a thud, his breathing stopping with a wet, bloody gurgle.

Where had she pulled the sword from, anyway?

Why was he asking himself that *now*?

Because it was safer not to think about the human part of what he was seeing. Puzzled and trying to ignore the fact that he had just seen his friend's mother kill not one person, but two, he looked at the blade...

...and noticed she didn't have a hand anymore. In fact, where her arm stopped and where the blade began was indiscernible. Her left hand had *become* the blade, just as it was morphing back into a bloodied hand under his very eyes and the terrified stare of the final masked man.

"So," Mrs. Zabini said with a humorless and frightening grin, crossing her arms and leaving a bloody handprint against the crimson fabric of her perfectly intact leather coat, "you choose. Number two or three?"

Springing into action, the man did what he probably thought was the safest decision to make; he grabbed the closest person to use a shield; a young teenage girl who looked like she was Harry's age. She screeched in panic as she was lifted up in a one-handed grip and held in front of the man, right in the line of fire. The man hid his wand and picked up a steak knife from a nearby table, holding it to the girl's throat in a stabbing hold.

"Checkmate, mudblood-lover." The man, whose voice was the familiar one Harry had heard earlier, growled. "Either you let me go quietly or you'll have this little bitch's blood all over you."

Mrs. Zabini did not reply. Her eyes thinning in cold fury, she lifted her wand directly at them.

"O-Oi..." The man growled, a nervous twinge entering his voice. "The girl..."

"*STU-PE-FY!*" The woman roared, over-exaggerating the spell's movements. With a deafening explosion and a blinding flash of red light, the spell shot forward, hitting the girl right in the stomach. However, the spell was so powerful it went right through her body and hit the surprised death eater. An instant later, both fell to the floor,

one magically stunned, the other quickly emptying herself from her blood and coughing gutturally, the knife still protruding from her throat.

Then, without caring about the terrified Muggles or the mess she had caused, without caring that her hand was still dripping from the blood of the other man she had killed, heedless of the upturned car outside surrounded by a puddle of blood, she left through the entrance, picked up a small sphere of light from her crimson and bloodied coat's pocket and coldly announced,

"Mission completed. Waiting for cleanup."

.

The scenery blurred. Harry felt his heart constrict. His best friend's mother, who was easily the nicest and coolest adult he had ever met, was some kind of murderer? How was that possible? Did Blaise know about this? Did Mr. Zabini?

.

Before he could get his bearings back, the images reformed themselves around him; it was the same street, but this time the Aurors' van was parked in front of the restaurant. The rain was still falling and it was just as dark as before, if not darker. A team of white-clad witches and wizards were busily repairing the damage done to the parking lot and the mini-van. The upturned car was already gone and so, fortunately, was the body. He had no wish to see what was left of that man.

Mrs. Zabini was easy to find. Not because her bloodstained red coat stood out among the green and the white – and it did – but because she was currently being yelled at by the one who had given her the orders earlier.

"Is that what you call 'killing as a last resort', Zabini?!" He, standing on his toes, shouted right in the ear of the taller woman, who did not even flinch. "Out of five targets, you manage to kill half of them and give the fifth a cranial fracture he'll be lucky to live through, never mind heal! Never mind the property damage, and the life of that

Muggle girl you practically killed yourself! What do you have to say for yourself?!"

"Who were caught?" She asked coldly, as if uncaring about the rest of it. Harry realized, with a chill, that this impression was probably right.

The squad captain gave her an incredulous look before his face contorted in fury. "Y—K...ARGH!" He threw his arms up and whirled around to face the closest green-clad man. "*You* deal with her, Dawlish!"

"Yes, sir," the man, a tough-looking, short and wiry-haired wizard, replied a bit pompously before turning to Mrs. Zabini. "The captured Death Eaters masks have not yet been uncursed. We don't know of their identities yet."

"Can't you just take them off?" The woman asked coldly.

"It's against the new regulations, since some death eaters have put nasty anti-unmasking spells on them. The regulations were established after Miss Wetherby lost an earlobe last week—"

"Shut up." She cut in with a barely audible voice, staring at something behind Harry. He turned to look and saw that two kneeling white-clad witches were busying themselves on a pair of black-clad shapes lying on the pavement, overlooked by a wizard in green battle robes.

Wordlessly, she got up and headed toward them, heedless of the protests of the tough-looking man. His hand caught her left arm in a tight grip, but she didn't stop or even slow her steady walk, thus ended up effortlessly throwing off his balance and sending him face first on the floor with one movement. As she approached, Harry heard the voices of the three Aurors clarify and strengthen, as if he was listening from a pair of earphones and someone approached a microphone to the source.

"...ne of those selective cursed masks: as long as he's unconscious, we can't remove it, unless we and everyone in an eight feet radius want to risk being cursed." One of the white-clad magi, a bossy-looking witch in her late thirties with shoulder-length blonde hair,

lightly tinted round glasses and a small mole just under her left eye, told her colleague.

"And we do you know what curse is there, madam?" The other, a younger-looking witch with short brown hair separated on the left side, asked.

The older woman made a negative sound. "With the speed we're catching them, I'm pretty sure it's something along the lines of a killing curse."

The brown haired one gulped. Apparently deciding she had heard enough gloom – or trying to make herself forget she might be about two feet away from a killing curse-bomb ready to explode – she turned toward the wizard. "Any news about the one we found near the trash container?"

"None, sorry Maya." The man, a short-haired wizard wearing a pair of black-rimmed glasses who looked like he was the same age as the younger woman, replied with a shrug. "Last I heard, he was in the emergency ward at St. Mungo's. Sounded pretty bleak, though."

'Maya' made a disappointed "Oh..." before she seemed to notice Mrs. Zabini. Her eyes trailed to the nearly dried blood on her coat a second before she gasped and stood. "Oh! Are you hurt, miss?"

Mrs. Zabini gave her a frosty glare. The girl squeaked and hid behind the older one, apparently noticing only now that the blood on her sleeve was *not* hers.

"Wake them up." Mrs. Zabini ordered.

The older woman's grey eyes tightened into a frown, but she didn't protest or contest the order. Apparently, Mrs. Zabini was higher on the chain of command than her.

"*Enervate*." She cast in an unsure sigh. Light green light surrounded both fallen forms for a few seconds before vanishing. Almost immediately afterwards, both men tried to sit up...

Mrs. Zabini's hand flashed. With one sweeping movement, she removed the mask of the closest death eater—

Harry's breath got caught in his throat. His heart stopped. His eyes widened in surprise and horror at the face he saw before him, under the cloak-uniform of his hated mortal enemy.

PROFESSOR SNAPE?!

It was... It was impossible! The man... was rough, tended to be mean to people he didn't like, was a cynic sometimes sadistic teacher whose style hovered around intimidation and threats to push them forward in class...

Hm... said like that...

But he also had a nice side that Harry had seen before. A side that made Harry trust him almost as much as he did Blaise and Draco. Plus, Dumbledore trusted him.

Maybe he wants to get closer to you and Dumbledore... a treacherous little voice whispered in his mind. To be in the perfect position to strike once Voldemort returns... And Dumbledore trusted Quirrell enough to let him help protect the stone...

That was... possible, he had to admit. But his behavior against Quirrell didn't fit the image of a Voldemort sympathizer. He had done everything to be in Quirrell/Voldemort's way. Maybe he hadn't known? But then, wouldn't he have tried to help anyway?

Hope for the best but prepare for the worst...

...that *could* also be it. The man didn't *want* Voldemort to come back, but just in case he did, he stayed near his and Dumbledore's back, ready to stab—

NO. That was Professor SNAPE, for goodness' sake. Not just anybody. What was that Mrs. Zabini had said? Shades of grey? Maybe he was a spy?

Maybe he was a spy against our side?

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts and chase the impending headache away, Harry decided not to think about it right now. The scene was continuing, after all, and unless he wanted to miss it

But, did he really want to see it?

he had to stay focused.

Mrs. Zabini's eyes were alive with emotions. She looked closer to the Zabini matriarch he knew than she had done since he had fallen in this... whatever it was. However, the feelings betrayed through them were strange and unfamiliar to him.

Recognition.

Surprise.

Anger.

Raw, unadulterated betrayal.

"Z-Zabini? Is that you?" Snape the death eater – no, better not get started on this again – asked, recognition also settling into his black eyes.

With a snarl of rage, Mrs. Zabini roughly grabbed his arm with her left hand. The two mediwitches and the Auror made a movement to stop her, but they were much, much too late. With an apparently effortless flick of her wrist,

CRACK

"ARGHH!"

she twisted his arm into an unnatural *backwards* angle at the elbow. Ignoring his agonized scream, she roughly pulled the mask off the other one...

DRACO?!

No, wait... though the resemblance was uncanny, the logical part of Harry's mind, which had been taking a serious beating from the

emotional side since the start, reminded him that, at this time, Draco was probably either not yet born, or a little baby. He didn't really know when the scene was happening, but seeing as Draco was the same age as he was and that the man in front of him was *clearly* an adult, he guessed it was Mr. Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father. He wasn't too surprised.

What does that make of Draco?

No, enough suspicions about people he trusted. Next thing he'd believe, Blaise really was an alien that meant to take over the world to turn it into a gigantic strawberry patch.

The insane thought was enough to distract him enough for him to ignore the immediate connotations to what he had learned in the last twenty seconds – he was commonly around not one, but at least two people with positive connections to Voldemort – but not enough for him to miss what happened next.

Lucius Malfoy gave a look at Professor Snape, who was curled up and apparently trying to cradle his arm without touching it – no small feat – before turning to Mrs. Zabini.

"The hell did you do *that* for you crazy psychotic bitch?! We're caught already!"

What happened next was extremely quick.

The two mediwitches turned toward them-

The Auror tried to reach Mrs. Zabini's arm in a restraining manner-

Mrs. Zabini's eyes hardened in cold fury-

The squad leader approached, breathing in and getting ready to yell at her-

Mrs. Zabini's foot went up over Lucius Malfoy's legs, just over her knees-

The man apparently noticed what she was about to do and tried to roll away-

Her foot went down with bone-shattering strength-

The result was both fortunate and unfortunate, agonizing yet not so bad, but it was undeniably disgusting. Mrs. Zabini's boot – apparently made of leather but much too solid and fixed to be so – went down *into* Lucius Malfoy's right knee, shattering it with a sickening bony crunch. Because he had moved, however, his left knee had been spared of anything worse than a small nick in the cloth of his death eater cloak. His right leg, however, now hung limply at the articulation, the knee oddly flattened.

And Lucius Malfoy screamed. The Auror reached her and roughly pulled her away from both of them, right in front of the captain who was staring at her disbelievingly. The younger Mediwitch hid her face into the older one's shoulder, while said older one stared at the new injuries she had unwittingly helped cause.

Unseen by everybody, a blonde haired woman with curiously rigid curls, long fingernails and jeweled spectacles allowed herself a small pleased smirk while pulling a quill and a piece of parchment from her crocodile skin purse...

"Red menace... blood spiller..." She was muttering, as if trying to decide a nickname...

And before the yelling, recriminating, writing or healing started, the scene shifted. Harry allowed himself a relieved sigh.

.

How much longer was this going to last? How much time had passed since he had found this place? Was Mrs. Zabini back? Had Blaise decided to look for him? Were they still searching or had they found the basin? Was he missing something? Some way to get out, to prevent him from being forever stuck in here, to constantly relive Mrs. Zabini's past...

By the time the scene reformed, Harry hadn't quite managed to calm his nerves down; his heart was still beating so fast and loud he was *sure* the people in the memories could notice. He now stood in some kind of stuffy office. Though the walls were well spaced out and the room was quite deep, the large desk full of documents, files and other bureaucratic forms blocking access to two-thirds of the room shrank it to nearly claustrophobic dimensions. The uniform faded yellow brick walls and monotonous shadowless lighting – obviously magical, as it had no obvious source and seemed to come from everywhere at once – didn't help at all.

There were only three people, other than himself, inside the room. Mrs. Zabini, her hair groomed and tied in a ponytail, dressed in her bloodless crimson coat, was on his side of the desk while two men stood on the other. Harry recognized one of them on first sight; standing beside the only chair in the room was someone he had seen just a few months ago, back at Hogwarts. Minister Fudge.

The other was impeccably clad in classy business robes and would have looked for all the world like a very rich – and rather pompous – businessman, had his eyes not been burning in undiluted fury. To his credit, his face was nearly passive, even bearing a barely strained polite smile. Seeing as he was sitting on the chair and that the small carton set in the exact middle of the desk in front of it bore a name, it was safe to assume that his name was Bartemius Crouch. As for his title, it was written underneath his name: "Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement".

Her boss, he realized.

He was also holding a rather crippled-looking document between his tensed fingers.

"Elmira Zabini," Crouch read, his voice devoid of the anger present in his gestures and eyes. "Born on October first Nineteen-sixty-three, joined Secret Unit sixteen on retired Auror Alastor Moody's recommendation. Was the only one to pass the selection stage, even with a serious injury. Completed her training on March of this year, first deployment on May seventh."

Here, he pulled out a file from the document and read it out loud. Harry noticed Fudge stretch his neck, trying to read over Crouch's shoulder without looking too obvious.

"Six targets were engaged," he read, "four were captured after incapacitation, one surrendered and the last died in an attempt to escape." He looked up to stare in the woman's eyes. "Almost every injuries were inflicted by *you*."

Mrs. Zabini only nodded, accepting the fact with no remorse. Crouch's upper lip stiffened in disgust at her stony face while his eyes went back to the file.

"Second deployment, June the second. Two targets, one capture, one kill and around two thousand pounds of property damage." Again, he raised his eyes directly at hers, "*in a Muggle area*."

Another indifferent nod. Fudge was now staring at her like she had two heads.

"Third and final deployment, July tenth. That's two days ago. Four targets and a blind mole were engaged. *TWO* captures, three deaths, not counting that Muggle girl. Official complaints were sent from the department of Muggle Worthy Excuses for making their job a *lot* harder, hence mister Fudge's presence."

The future minister gave her a small and very misplaced smile. She gave him a hard glare.

"They would have had a lot more work on their hands if those death eaters had remained free." The woman stated coldly, the first words she had said since the start of the scene.

Ignoring the interruption, Crouch continued. "The two captured 'death eaters', Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape, both received crippling injuries... *after getting captured*. Mr. Malfoy's knee will never be able to hold his weight for more than ten minutes without a cane for support; he's already having one custom-made for him. As for Mr. Snape, his injury is not as grave, but the arthritis resulting from the healing will be a problem with his job of potions maker."

"Having one custom made?" Mrs. Zabini repeated, her face widening in shock. "Am I to understand they were *freed*?"

"Indeed; Lucius Malfoy was found to having been under Imperio, while Mister Snape—"

"Imperio?! *Bullshit!*" She barked, uncrossing her arms to punch the desk strongly enough to send a pile of files toppling to the floor. "That son of a pure-blooded bitch doesn't *need* Imperio to kill people!"

Giving her a harsh glare, Crouch methodically pushed her clenched fist off his desk, pushed the files that had fallen in front of him aside and continued to read, "mister Snape's innocence was confirmed by Albus Dumbledore himself, the reasons why being confidential."

Mrs. Zabini gave a disbelieving snort.

"Maybe I would have given you a fourth chance, or at least kept you as a threat weapon," He continued, getting up from his chair to stare right into the slightly smaller woman's eyes, "had Mr. Malfoy not formally complained. But that's not the only problem."

Without looking, he pulled a desk drawer open and took a piece of Newspapers out. I say piece, because it was exactly that; a bunch of torn, ripped, folded and mistreated pages that *one day* had looked like a Newspaper. On the front page, still readable if only due to its large size, the title declared:

"AUROR TERRORISES MUGGLE DINER! FOUR DEAD, TWO INJURED!"

"Rita Skeeter struck again." Fudge explained unhelpfully. "I swear, she's as much a menace as you are." He added casually.

Mrs. Zabini's eyes became even colder at the declaration.

"Be that as it may, I'm afraid I cannot handle your... irresponsible and reckless behavior any longer. You are hereby stripped of your title and forbidden to do any kind of defense work again on English soil."

"Please understand," Fudge piped up in what he must have believed to be a calming tone, "that 'extreme' Aurors like you are no longer necessary in today's world. If you had been here a few years ago, though, it would have been different, but now... You-know-who *is* finally gone for good, after all. We don't want to look worse than him."

'Talk about rolling salt in the wound...' Harry noted.

Mrs. Zabini's face was completely emotionless, though there was a small glitter in her eyes. "I will leave, then." She said in a cold and slightly constricted voice.

Crouch grunted while picking up a file from the floor, not even bothering to look up at her.

"Have a nice day," Fudge said, smiling at the woman they had just fired.

She turned around and walked out without a word.

.

As mist surrounded him again, Harry couldn't help but stare blankly at where Fudge had been. No *wonder* she hated him, he had treated her sacking like a pep talk!

But he had to admit he didn't blame Crouch; Mrs. Zabini had been... dangerous, to say the least. Though the decision to prevent her from ever working as a crime-fighter again was a bit *harsh*. The Mrs. Zabini he knew would make a perfect Auror, of that he was certain.

The mists parted again, revealing Mrs. Zabini, standing in the middle of a small bathroom, staring blankly at a wall-mounted mirror. She was an absolute mess; her hair was wilder and more unkempt than ever, her eyes were bloodshot and bore enormous sleepless bags underneath. In her tightly clenched left hand was her wand.

"Useless..." She muttered, staring at herself. A lone tear escaped her eye, following the red path along her cheek to fall down her chin, landing into the glistening sink.

"No... need for me..." Her right hand went up and touched the mirror where her own face was reflected. With flawless dexterity, her wand went backwards in a stabbing hold.

"Use...less..." Her left hand went up to point the wand's tip straight at her heart...

"Er... Elmira? Is everything all right?" A worry-tinged young female voice asked from the other side of the door.

Mrs. Zabini didn't even seem to notice. Her eyes closed as her other hand went to the base of her wand that began to glow faintly in regular, timed double strobes, like a heartbeat. The light became brighter with every beat, eventually growing even brighter than the bathroom lights. Her face furrowed in concentration and... hesitation?

'What is she doing?' Harry wondered. He felt an odd chill in his back; whatever it was, it didn't *feel* right to him.

The mirror cracked loudly as the light continued to grow in strength. The young girl's voice came back with alarm, but was mostly blocked out under an unnatural wind that picked up in the sealed room, knocking bottles of shampoo off the bath-mounted shelf with a plastic clatter. One of the light bulbs on the roof, sending glass shards raining down on the woman, who didn't even flinch, not even when an ugly-looking cut drew blood on her right hand.

"*ALOHOMORA!*" He heard from outside, a second before the door burst open in a windy explosion. A shocked gasp later, someone barged in the room in a black and purple blur, knocking against Mrs. Zabini and deflecting her wand—

KA-POW

--that burst into a deafening explosion of light not an instant later, digging a foot-wide hole in the wall behind the woman. The wand burst at the same time, exploding in a shower of charred wood...

...oddly familiar charred wood...

The wand pieces in the box?

And then, there was nothing but utter silence, except for erratic, shuddering breaths. In the newly born darkness, he was unable to see anything that was not a bare silvery outline lit by the pale moonlight streaming from the room beyond the bathroom door. He *could* see that the woman was entangled in someone else's much smaller arms and legs.

"...dora..." He heard Mrs. Zabini breathe.

"Elmira..." The girl whispered softly, her shaky voice matching with the shudders of the breaths. "Why?"

"I'm... useless..." Harry had never heard Mrs. Zabini's voice sound so *weak*, so utterly despaired. "I have nothing left..."

For a few more seconds, there were no other sounds in the bathroom than slowly calming breaths and choked cloth-muffled sobs. The outlines did not move at all.

"That's not true," The young girl whispered. "There's still Blaise. You still have her. It's not too late..."

"Blaise...?" Mrs. Zabini repeated. "My..."

"Your daughter... little Bee..." The words were said fondly and with an audible smile; whoever the girl was, she knew Blaise. "You can't leave her an orphan, too..."

"Blaise... My daughter..." Mrs. Zabini repeated, as if she was remembering someone long forgotten. "Blaise... I... haven't been the best mother... I've *barely* been a mother for her..."

The outlines moved. Harry saw a glint of purple hair on the younger girl's head, but it could have been a trick of the light.

"It's not too late." The girl repeated, pulling Mrs. Zabini into a sit. "You can still be there for her."

"I... I promise... I will..." The woman said, conviction filling her voice.

"Good." The girl said, evidently relieved. The two blurry shapes shared a hug. He heard a loud snuffle, before Mrs. Zabini's voice came again, full of the strength he knew of today:

"I promise I'll always be there to help her... I'll be the best mother ever."

.

When the mist returned, Harry felt the oddest sensation of being sucked upwards, as if invisible hands had grabbed him and were guiding him towards the skies.

Ba-DUMP

"Oof!"

And Harry found himself landing in a heap on a concrete floor. A quick look around later, he barely resisted the urge to bellow a cheer; he was back in the Zabinis' basement. The hated basin full of that silver thing – and memories... memories given a physical form? – was right there, in front of him, innocently shimmering in the dim sunlight seeping through the thin window near the ceiling.

Pausing only to shove the basin back in the box – against all laws of physics, no drops of the liquid escaped it – and cover it underneath the partially burned uniform

"The hell did you do that for you crazy psychotic bitch?!"

while wishing futilely that he could push what he had seen away and hide it as easily. Scrambling up the stairs to the first, then to the second floor, taking a second to kick the door shut behind him, heedless of the noise, he barged into his room – Blaise's door was thankfully closed – shut the door behind him and threw himself on his bed, burrowing his face in his pillow.

He could feel the fluffy mass of packed feathers and cloth against his cheek, feel the wetness left on it by the tears he was unwillingly leaving behind on its surface. Good. That meant he *really* was out. This was reality. This wasn't a memory. This wasn't a part of Mrs.

Zabini's past, hidden and concealed away for a reason he perfectly understood.

Her past was simply terrible. Compared to her, he'd had it easy.

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Author's notes:

BIG, BIG APOLOGIES FOR THE WAIT!!! As you can see, this chapter is a monster. Add to it a bit of self-doubt (I'm a bit embarrassed by the earlier books Oo), planning on another story, gaming/manga addictions [Like getting all 13 Lain episodes on my comp and trying to make sense of them]... well, I've been busy. Plus, re-reading this thing five times with my notes on Mrs. Zabini at hand didn't help.

Last Chapter's dream cameos: Detective Conan/Case Closed (shudders, damn dubs), Harry Potter (obviously), Pokémon (also), Trigun (the Random Black Cat), Bondage Fairies (...I'm a hot-blooded male. Sue me.), Aah! Megami-sama/Oh! My Goddess, the Alien movies and South Park. Ok, so not all of them were animes...

For those who haven't guessed, I've mapped out the Zabini's house. - (humming on Spiderman's song) perfectman, perfectman... he's obsessed, perfec-tionnistman...

Grr, removes asterixes... I hate it... and it kills my smilies...

I'm ashamed... I admit to having used Google's translation tools for the Italian parts... T-T Apologies (and demands for corrections) to native Italians... And same thing for Germans, if I made a mistake.

Dark chapter, eh? I've been waiting to write it for a *long* time. Mrs. Zabini's dark history revealed... well, most of it, actually. I actually scared myself at some parts; I wasn't sure I'd be able to write those scenes properly. Emotions, angst and horror aren't my thing, usually.

But it was fun . Although some of the comments that Harry thinks, I'm not sure if it's him or *me* who thought them first...

Special dedication to anyone (or at least, the first one on each) who manages to make a proper guess about the things I've only hinted about it. It could be *anything*. And post them up on the group, please -. I've put up enough hints in there to last me all book 3 while keeping it cryptic enough that no one should be able to guess the important bits

The original version had Harry trying to decorticate the memories, but then I remembered I want you guys to try and guess it. I've re-read it enough time that I can assure you there are *no* mistakes.

Oh, and another dedication note for anyone who manages to find the anime cameo and everyone who's involved.

Again, sorry for the wait... Guess that means: Don't trust me when I say "It shouldn't take too long".

Next Chapter: Hogwarts, Dementors and Remus Lupin...

ANSWERS TO THE PENSIEVES OF THE REVIEWERS

Drunken Devil87: Sowwy!! I kinda feel bad about it, actually ;;;. I hope enough things happened in this chapter to compensate for the wait.

Jaz7: Here it is, at long, long, agonizingly *long* last!

JeanieBeanie33: Blah, already read a 100 (long) chapters story in five days . But thank you. pats your back To be honest, Grindelwald is about the only thing I didn't touch in the HP universe... gotta remedy that... Oh, and KrayZi apparently read it in 2 days, so... tough luck

NathanPostmark: Thank you

KrayZi: Erm... faster than a month...? Sorry! ;;; And I have a pretty good plan for the things I want to happen in book 3. Can't say the same for 4 and 5, though... = /

Hermionepotter141: Actually, I really have *no* idea of the final couples... Hovering around Harry/Blaise or Harry/Ginny, though. shrug Romance isn't my strong point or my priority.

Black Hood: Really? Why? They're fun characters...

Hinghing: Well, I'm honored to be the *first* and best thing you read on this site... - And I hope you don't mind if I call on you if I need Chinese for Xu...

Chibi Pyro Duo: Case Closed... twitch I cannot believe they changed Ran's name to Rachel... and Kogoro to Richard?! UGH! (murders translators, hugs the Scanslated versions). Improve character interactions, eh? I'll work on it. And I have a pretty good idea on how Harry gets the Marauder's map. Or at least someone near him does.

Fate: Glad you liked it!

-Sir. Noname-: Next time, do leave a name behind, please... As for the food thing: Harry is *thin*, but I guess I *was* a bit extreme, eh? Gonna have to correct it in the rewrites, I guess.

Torifire126: I think we're talking about the same theory, here . A good example of that is the game Chrono Cross... It was very interesting for me

Blip-Dragon: (blink) er... thanks?

Trugeta: Will do!

Tonnocal: Lol, that was the effect I wanted. Lol? "no, close aquatence? [in the tense of water, yeah, great spelling, I just can't figure out how to spell acquaintance right]" You actually wrote it the right way the second time around :P. And we have a winner, but I won't say to what. Unguessable, eh? Yay!

Stevethecool: Lol, sorry! Sorry you know peeps like Lockhart, I mean... Oo Erm... ;;; sorryforthewait?

Big D on a Diet: (O O) NO WAY! Dudley on a diet!? dies Ooh, I like that curse... And it's probably something along her private brand of

Goldfish sushi (because it has no chance of spreading anywhere else, except maybe the garbage can). I like my review responses... =/ If pull a Nazi on me, I'm switching to schnoogle. And I'll bomb them.

High Serpent King: Lol. I have a plan for that, don't worry, it'll make sense (I hope). The seeds for that little thing were in last chapter, actually.

Risty: (O o) You poor, poor soul... No animes... I'd die. Thanks

Demon's soul of Baer: THANKS

Ran Hoshino: That's all right... just review next time cocks a gun. Conan/Harry, eh? Well, some of the characters fit the roles perfectly... though I guess it would be interesting to see Conan actually *meeting* Harry... Secret mission in Japan, maybe? HAH! You try to make sense of THAT mystery, Kudo!

Gryffindorbabe89: ALMOST everything. There are some holes that have been bothering me.

Flummox: Ack! (gets glomped) ...wow... you are absolutely insane. If you want to know how Pokémon sounds in French... well, imagine the main character has a voice that sounds like he's 30 and trying to sound young (which is probably the truth... why they can't use female voice actors for kids like the original does I have no idea). And someone here has read Black cat... But Black cat has the Random WHITE cat, not the black one.

Blackheart Syaoran: Can't wait to see what you thought of THIS chapter...

Krissy Riddle: Really?! (O o) Do I normally make random insane scenes like that?

Dragonbrat: Eek... gonna kill me this time around... Good point :P

Lunawolf: I can see it now... Harry the monk... ...nope, never mind. Can't do it. And yes, I'll have to think about it. I'm hoping the ending couple will jump in my face, though :P

I'm no the weakest link: thanks.

Lilyqueen777: What is she... good question . I'll answer it eventually (and cryptically hint it a LOT of times before I then).

Kraeg001: Hehehe... well, that's how I pictured it. I just *had* to write it.

Shadowface: I tried...?

Ranchan17: well, you found those in the Omake at least... A bit obvious, though :P

Volo: (shrug) Detective Conan (or... shudders Case closed... UGH. I HATE dubs.)

Athenakitty: Ack! dodges the pie breathes twitches

Dragonsprincess: Go watch Detective Conan, then... and not the dub. It already looks horrible and I haven't seen it yet. Here's hoping more Fanfic Writers find the Japanese version... If I read one more fic with 'Rachel Moure' and 'Jimmy Kudou' in it, I'll strangle someone. And nope, Black Cat has the Random WHITE cat. Erk, confusing. Trigun has the Random Black Cat... y'know, that cat that shows up every *single* damned episode... Eerk? Like Kaede, eh? Whoops, not my intention at all.

Kage Mirai: Thanks!

The Vampire Story Hunter: Eh? 16? I thought for sure it was 17...

.

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NOTE: Since I'm starting to have a LOT of reviewers, I won't answer to those who pull one-liners from now on. Doesn't mean I won't read them all, though.